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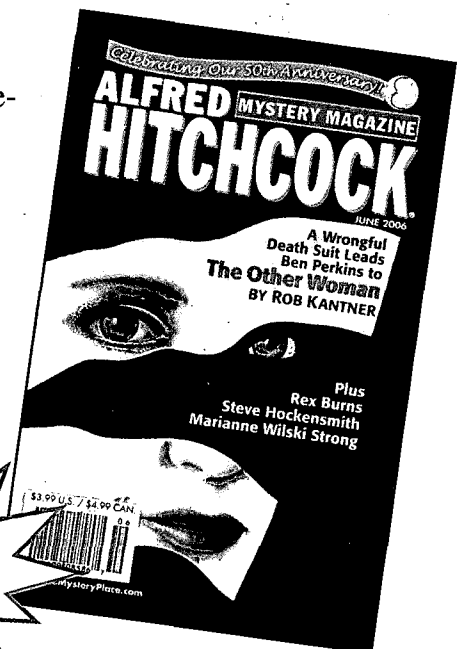

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Art by Laurie Harden

BACK TRACK

by Mary Freeman

Miami waded hip deep in enthusiastic, round Rott puppies. "Get *down,* guys, before I step on you!" Not really hip deep—Katy only had five this time—just seemed like it. Laughing, she slipped through the run's gate with the empty food pans, closed it on five pairs of disappointed brown eyes. "I hope Terry has a good reason for not showing up today." She paused to pat Katy's broad black head. "I'm not going to wake Jeff up to help clean runs after he was out on a search all night." He and King had stumbled into the house just at sunup. He'd fed King, told her that they'd found the confused old man who'd wandered off, and had fallen asleep on the bed in his clothes.

Her cell phone buzzed. Miami piled the pans on the wash bench by the garage and flipped it open. "Find It, Inc.," she said, running water in the sink full of dirty pans.

"Hey, Miami." Mike McKenzie's voice came terse over the phone. "I got a job for you or Jeff."

Miami shut off the water. He was at a scene. She could always tell by his tone. "Better be me. Jeff just came off a search. What happened?" Good thing the dogs were all fed. The runs would have to wait.

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"Kidnap case." Mike lowered his voice. "A five-year-old kid. Can you get here quick?"

King, she thought. He'd be better than Katy. But King was tired and she wasn't going to wake Jeff. "On my way." She already had the equipment shed open, reaching for Katy's working harness. "Where are you?"

Mike gave her an address and her eyebrows rose. "Isn't that in the new development between Butler Park and Allison? The fancy one with the gates?"

"Yep." He bit the word off. "They'll be watching for you at the gate and they'll let you through."

Mary Freeman is the author of four published mystery novels and a host of short stories in several different genres. She has also authored three science fiction novels as Mary Rosenblum; the latest, *Horizons*, will be available from Tor in November. When she's not writing, she tracks with Rottweilers, like the heroine of her story. ¶

What a day for Terry to be gone. In his twenties, the lanky Terry seemed to live in a world that didn't entirely overlap most people's reality. Sometimes he got lost in his own world on the way to help out at the kennel. He was probably down at the creek, catching and releasing crawdads or watching the minnows.

Miami headed for the house at a run. Katy scrambled to her feet at the sight of the harness, started dancing in circles, her grin so wide you could see every molar. "Yeah, we're working." Miami gave her a quick pat. "Just be quiet." She tiptoed in, scribbled a quick note to Jeff, and left it on the kitchen table. If she woke him to tell him she was going, he'd insist on bringing King, and he had looked like hell.

She loaded Katy into her crate in the van and headed down the pot-holed county road as fast as she dared.

Oak Knoll, the bronze script on the granite wall proclaimed. Miami slowed as the twin wrought-iron gates swung back electronically. The uniformed man in the small gatehouse stared at her, his expression disapproving. Well, the dog van *was* beat up. Miami gave the guard a sweet smile, which earned her a scowl. Shaking her head, she watched the numbers on the brick pillars that flanked every driveway as she curved up the slope. The houses were a first for this forgotten, rural section of Pennsylvania. This area had died with the Wildwood Mine, and nothing had really resurrected it in the decades since. But real estate was going up near the cities, and telecommuting meant that you could move out and buy acreage away from the urban sprawl. And stay safe behind your fence and your guards, Miami thought as she neared the crest of the wide, curving drive. People here didn't shop in Butler Park's tiny market.

The two green and white sheriff's cars marked her destination. Miami pulled in behind them and climbed out, pausing a moment to

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admire the sweeping view of the valley below. Birds caroled in the oaks that surrounded the house and the landscaping was subdued, elegant, with a tiny water feature chuckling over granite slabs beside the wide, tiled entry. The house was huge, all brick and stucco with a tiled roof. How many rooms? She eyed the leaded windows, the multiple chimneys. The cop cars did not match the décor. She looked down the street, but if the neighbors were curious, they were too well bred to come out and gawk from their front yards.

"Miami!" Mike rounded the corner from the rear of the house, his expression grim. "Want to bring the dog back here? We got a real clear start and it happened less than an hour ago. I'm praying the guy's on foot—lot of woods back there and nobody spotted a car parked on the road here. Our noble sheriff is grandstanding," he murmured as Katy wriggled and licked his hands. "He wasn't happy when I suggested calling you. Hey, Katy." He patted her, but his eyebrows rose. "Jeff isn't with you?"

"He's beat. He and King were out all night." She heard the defensive note in her voice, took a breath. "Like you say, he can't be too far . . . a ground tracker like Katy is fine here. Okay, Katy, enough with the greeting." She pulled the enthusiastic Katy away from Mike. "Let's go to work, girl." Katy's ears pricked and she grinned, panting, her whole body alert as they reached the backyard. An in-ground pool bordered in tile gleamed turquoise and tropical in the early summer sun. Umbrellas shaded wrought-iron tables and cushioned chairs, poolside. A gray-haired man with a taut gym physique and perfect tan stood behind a sobbing blond woman slumped on a chaise longue, his hands protectively on her shoulders, his lean face hard with anger. A skinny, red-haired teen with pale, acne-spotted skin leaned against a cedar-sided shed, arms crossed on his chest, staring at his feet. He looked vaguely familiar. Sheriff Bauer faced them, speaking in an earnest and heavy tone. Oh yeah, he was definitely in his element.

Mike cleared his throat. "Mr. and Mrs. Grimes, this is Miami Keller, with the tracking dog I told you about."

"Oh!" The blond woman on the chaise erupted to her feet, her oval face swollen with tears, stunningly beautiful for all that, slender fingers knotted at her chin. "Oh, thank God. What do you need . . . something he wore, something like that?"

She was about twenty-five years younger than her husband, Miami guessed. "Yeah," she said. "A shirt would be good. Anything." Mrs. Grimes raced off to the house, slim as a fawn.

The man turned those hard, angry eyes on her. "That's a Rottweiler, not a bloodhound."

"Rotts do a good job." Miami bent to buckle the butter-soft tracking harness around Katy's broad chest.

"I never heard that." Grimes's flat tone implied that if he hadn't heard it, it couldn't be true.

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"I don't know that a dog's gonna help in this case." Bauer bit off the words. "The perp probably had a car parked nearby."

"It's a long way to any road, unless you park where the gate guys can see you." The boy spoke up quietly, his eyes still fixed on his feet.

"When did you ever make the effort to look at a map?" Grimes snapped.

"He's right." Mike cleared his throat. "Let's get started, Miami."

"I have his shirt. It happened right here, right here in the yard, isn't that just too awful?"

Mrs. Grimes was back, breathless, her face flushed, a yellow striped polo shirt clutched in her hand. "I'll never be able to sleep in this house again. He came right through the fence from the woods. I heard Jonathan shout and by the time I got out here, he was disappearing into the woods . . . he had . . . oh God, he had . . ." She mewed and collapsed against her husband's chest. "He can't have gone far, oh, please find my baby."

Grimes stared over her disheveled blond head at the teen. "Seems like you would have had the guts to *do* something."

"I guess . . . I just didn't hear anything," the boy mumbled. "And then . . . I just froze. I'm sorry, Dad."

"He did just the right thing." Mike stepped abruptly forward. "Anything else could have gotten him or his brother killed. Son, you want to show Miami where you saw him drag your brother through?"

The redhead nodded silently and marched across the turf lawn beyond the pool.

"Hurry up, damn it," his father snapped. "Act like it matters."

The kid's shoulders twitched and he broke into a trot, past a three-level redwood play structure complete with climbing ropes, a canvas-roofed platform, and a slide. It looked brand-new and unused, and Katy sniffed at a sanded post as they passed. The huge backyard ended at a six-foot-tall deer fence of welded wire. "The house has an alarm system," Mrs. Grimes whimpered from the safety of her husband's supporting arm. "Whoever thought . . . out here . . ."

"He went through here, I guess." Jonathan looked at Katy, held out a tentative hand. "Can I pet her?"

"No," Grimes snapped. "It's a Rottweiler."

Miami ignored them both, staring at a gap about three yards away where the bright new wire had been cut. An artistically grouped clump of lilacs and a bronze birdbath effectively screened the cut in the fence from the house and the forest came right up to the wire, the shady limbs of the oaks seeming to reach into the sunny yard.

"Brandon was playing on the swing," Jonathan mumbled. "Sandy . . . my stepmother . . . she likes me to keep an eye on Brandon when he's out here. I was just kind of thinking, I guess . . . I turned around when he yelled." Jonathan stared at Katy, his hands behind his back. "This guy was dragging him through the fence. I guess he had his hand over Brandon's mouth or something

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and I didn't hear anything at first."

His father glared. "I have a hard time understanding how the hell anyone, even you, could just sit there and not notice . . ."

"No, Mr. Grimes." Bauer cleared his throat. "Let's not waste time here. Go ahead and try the dog," he snapped at Miami.

Miami chirped at Katy and angled her path so that Grimes blocked Katy's way. Grimes backed up quickly at the dog's stare, stumbling just a bit on the grass.

"It's your show, Miami." Mike came up beside her, his voice low. "He may not be traveling fast, so hold her back if you think she's getting close. We don't want to spook him."

Miami glanced at his Glock in its holster. It was unsnapped. He thought the guy was out there. And suddenly she was very glad he was coming along. They hadn't done anything like this before. Jeff had, and he carried an old bullet-wound scar. She rubbed Katy's broad head, telling herself she wasn't nervous, pulled the water bottle from her belt, and gave Katy a drink. Katy looked up at her, reading her nerves, tail wagging uncertainly.

"It's okay, girl. Just me." But Katy didn't relax. Miami scratched her ears, then led the dog to the cut in the fence, stepped through with her, snapped on the line, and squatted, holding out the shirt. She let Katy get a good sniff, then dropped the shirt on the ground and stood. "Go find," she said.

Katy grinned up at her, then dropped her head and started working her way back and forth along the cut in the fence. She caught a scent, head jerking around, body following in the familiar "on track" turn.

"Got it," Miami said softly.

Three steps from the fence and the temperature dropped five degrees in the deep oak shade. Miami let the tracking line slide through her fingers. It telegraphed Katy's concentration as the dog puzzled out the scent picture in the dry mast of rotted oak leaves between the thick trunks. Miami tried not to think about a man hiding in the shadows . . . with a gun. Something wasn't right. Her nerves? Had she put Katy off stride? Miami frowned as Katy wove slowly between the trees. Twice she stopped and looked back at Miami, then quartered and tracked back briefly, again looking at Miami as if for reassurance before resuming the track. What was going on here? The second time, Miami had to tell her to "go find." This was a hot track. Something had blown it.

They broke suddenly into a small clearing full of low blueberry brush. A small black and white woodpecker flitted across the sun-hot space. Miami eyed the tall brush and trees surrounding the clearing, her skin tightening, feeling eyes and a gun sight trained on her. Katy started to circle, paused, and looked back at Miami. "What's wrong, gal?" Miami swallowed. "You need a drink?" She shouldn't. Not this soon. Miami squirted water into Katy's mouth. Got a wet, worried

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lick in return. Miami scanned the small clearing, sweat beading her forehead, feeling as if she had a bull's-eye painted on her chest.

Katy's panting filled the silence, and nearby, the woodpecker *rat-a-tat-tat*ed. Slowly, the dog worked the clearing, grasshoppers zooming away from her feet, a cicada buzzing briefly, loudly. When she crossed the track she had followed in, she stopped, looked at Miami, and wagged her short tail hesitantly.

"Okay, I hear you."

"What happened?" Mike had followed them in. "She lose the track?"

"I don't know." Miami couldn't meet Mike's eyes. "Maybe he had a helicopter waiting."

"Little hard to land a chopper here without someone noticing," Mike drawled. "Be hard to drive a four-wheel rig out of here, too. You see any tire tracks?"

"No." Miami bit the word off. "Mike . . ." She drew a deep breath. "I think it's . . . me. Thinking of a guy with a gun. I . . . should have waked Jeff."

"I'm watching, Miami. I'm watching hard." Mike contemplated Katy, frowned. "Want to start her over?"

Miami brought Katy back to the fence and started her a couple of yards away. This time, Katy worked hesitantly from the beginning. When she crossed the original track, she indicated it clearly, then stopped and looked back at Miami. *We already did this,* her expression said. Miami called her in and they worked all along the fence, her stomach full of lead.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Grimes called from the other side of the fence. "Can't she find the trail?" A thin note of hysteria edged her voice. "Why isn't she following them?"

"I told you there was no point. That's not a bloodhound out there." Grimes's voice carried clearly. A chopper clattered in the distance. Miami looked up. TV news clear out from town.

"All right, we tried," Bauer announced. "We've got our Search and Rescue team and a whole bunch of officers working the other side of the woods," he said confidently. "Now you two need to just go back to the house. Wait for the ransom call. You did the right thing bringing us in, now we'll just take it from here. . . ." His voice faded as he herded the Grimes family back across the lawn.

Katy bumped her broad head against Miami's leg and whined. "It's not your fault, gal." Miami took the dog's face in her hands. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Miami." Mike squeezed her shoulder, then followed Bauer and the Grimeses into the house.

Katy flung herself belly-down in the cool dirt and panted.

A kid's life was at stake here. Miami closed her eyes. She should have waked Jeff, brought King. They had both done this before. She trudged back to the van with Katy, glad that everyone had retreated

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into the house. To her surprise, she found the teen, Jonathan, leaning against the side of the van. Katy gave him a wary sniff and a brief wag of greeting, then sat down close to Miami's side.

"My dad's wrong." The kid stared at her. "Rotts are good trackers. I looked 'em up." He looked down at Katy, who was ignoring him. "I really want one. Can I pet her?"

"Sure." Miami stroked Katy's ears, turned to hang her harness on its hook in the van.

"I saw you when you came to the school last May." Jonathan leaned over to pat Katy and she flattened her ears briefly, but gave him a polite smile. "They brought you in for that tracking demonstration. I was the kid you found."

"That was King. I remember you now." She opened up Katy's crate, and Katy hopped in and flopped down on her pad. "You did a good job of hiding. Nice challenge for King," she said politely.

"No, it wasn't. I did a crummy job. He found me right away." He said it matter-of-factly, and she thought about Grimes's scornful words out back.

"You have to be seriously lost to challenge King." She sighed. "I'm sorry we didn't find your little brother."

"He's not my little brother."

His flat tone made her look at him, but he was staring at Katy. A muscle jumped at the corner of his mouth. "I Googled you on the Internet, too, saw your Web site about your kennel and the dogs you train. All Rotts. How your dogs work with cops, do drug searches, all that."

"It's nice to do what you love as a day job, is all." Except when you blow it.

"I want a Rott," the boy said.

"Why?" Miami climbed behind the wheel.

"Nobody picks on you."

Yeah, she remembered now. She'd picked the kid for the demo because he was so clearly an outsider among the pack of high-school kids. An outsider. A loser. She knew how that felt. "That's not a real good reason," she said as she turned the key. "They're bred to work, not just to look scary."

"Oh, I'd train it." The boy stepped back as the engine roared to life. "I'd train it to be an attack dog. A Schutzhund III dog."

And that was the big problem with breeding Rotts, Miami thought. She gave the kid a brief wave without answering and backed down the driveway, the hot noontime air drying the sweat on her face and her neck. She cranked the window up and punched the air conditioning, but its chilly breath did nothing to cool her mood as she drove back to the kennel.

Jeff was awake when she got back, eating salad at the kitchen table. "King told me you were leaving. Did you find the kid okay?

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How'd it go?" He tossed the hopeful King a slice of carrot. "Want some?" He nodded at the bowl full of salad on the counter. He'd put shrimp in it. For her.

"No, we didn't find the kid. He got kidnapped." Miami got herself an Iron City from the fridge, popped it, and sat down at the table, ignoring Jeff's pointed look. "I blew it, Jeff. I froze." She gulped beer. "All I could think about was some guy with a gun out there, aiming at us. I really threw Katy. She acted like she lost her nose. We had a clear start, a track that couldn't have been an hour old . . . and all she could do was worry about me. She never focused." Miami tilted the bottle to let icy hop and malt slide down her throat. "I thought I was so hot. Let you sleep and just take over. I cost that kid. You could have found him."

Jeff laid his fork down. "You don't know that. Miami . . . I'm always scared. King feels it. He has to . . . you can't hide it from your dog. Katy'll learn . . . but you just can't train for that fear—when somebody ahead of you just might be waiting to blow your head off. The kidnapper was probably long gone. Don't blame yourself. Or Katy."

And he might have been right there, twenty yards away. "I'm not blaming Katy." She got up, hurled her empty bottle into the recycle bin by the stove. Glass shattered. Katy was staring at her, worried. "Honey, I'm not mad at you," Miami soothed. Even King was staring at her from his rug in front of the cold wood stove.

"How about giving yourself the same break?"

Miami got another beer out of the fridge.

"I think you don't need that." Jeff didn't raise his voice.

"I'll get drunk if I want. Don't act like . . ." Miami bit the words off and flushed, her hand on the fridge door. *Don't act like my father,* she had been about to say. But he *was* her father, never mind that she'd only found that out less than a year ago. She shoved the bottle back into the fridge and did not slam the door, aware of Katy and King both staring at her, their ears a little back, not sure what was going on. She felt guilty, because he blamed himself for his absence from her life growing up. "Jeff, I'm sorry." She didn't look at him.

"For being mad at yourself?" He pushed his chair back, came over to stand behind her, his hands light on her shoulders. "The first time's hard, okay? It won't be so bad next time. There's nothing wrong with Katy. Or with you."

"I just hope they find that kid okay." She looked down at his hand on her shoulder. He could train a dog to fly if he wanted to. She sighed. "I better go clean that puppy run. It'll be a mess by now. Did Terry ever show up?"

"Nope. Did he go walkabout this morning?" Jeff gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I guess he had one of his days. That woman from Arizona called, the one who wanted the little male. She's going to back out."

"You're kidding." Miami squatted and began to pick broken glass

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from the recycle bin. "She was so hot for a puppy."

"Better now than after she ruined him." Jeff shrugged. "I'm going to go get Jingo out. I want to work him on a few more midafternoon tracks before I start him working with his handler. He's having a hard time when the ground heats up and the scent starts rising. I want him more confident before he starts working with someone else, even though this guy has handled tracking dogs before. Don't cut yourself," he said as he headed for the door.

"Okay, I won't . . . Dad."

Jeff smiled and let himself out. Jingo was going to a home with a small city police force. They had wanted him trained for drug sniffing, but they wanted him to track and search, too. A macho three-year-old, he had a good working attitude. Miami liked him a lot. He wouldn't have been the best dog for a pet home, but Jeff was turning him into a dynamite search dog.

To her surprise, Terry was in with the puppies when she finished picking up glass and got out to the kennel area, sitting in the middle of the run, covered with sawdust. He had his arms open wide and the entire litter was competing to lick his face in a solid wall of wriggling puppies and pink tongues. Miami had to smile, in spite of her day. Thin as a rail, dressed in Jeff's hand-me-down jeans and work shirt, he had a thin, Cajun face beneath a mop of unruly brown hair that he usually rubber-banded into a ponytail. Not quite all there, he was terminally shy. The dogs loved him. Jeff guessed autism, but whatever, he had showed up in Butler Park about a year ago, working various menial jobs and sleeping in the woods, she guessed, before they'd hired him to clean runs and wash pans and found him a run-down little cabin he could rent. His accent suggested the South, but he never talked about his past.

"Hey, Terry, I missed you this morning," she called. "You get lost?"

He started as if she had poked him with a stick. "Oh, Miami." He scrambled to his feet, scattering puppies. "Sorry. I . . . forgot. To come today. I'm sorry." He blushed red as a beet. "I just . . . I forgot it was Tuesday. You know?"

He couldn't lie worth beans, but she wasn't about to pry. "It's okay, Terry, just come tomorrow, okay?" Miami smiled reassuringly. "These guys miss you."

"I'll be early." He gave her a sheepish grin. "Look, look what they can do now!" He brushed puppies off of him. Grinned down at them. "Sit," he said. Five fat little black puppy-butts hit the ground almost at once, and five pairs of eyes fixed expectantly on his face. "Free," he yelped and squatted as all five puppies leaped on him again. "Miami, aren't they smart?" He scooped up the runt, the little black male. "'Specially him. I call him Einstein. He does everything first, so I named him. He was smart, right? I got the right name?" Terry looked suddenly anxious. "Wasn't he? I saw about him on TV."

"Einstein, yeah, he was smart." Miami leaned on the chain-link,

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her mood lifting. "You know, we've got a week before these guys leave. Since you're doing such a great job, why don't you work on teaching them to walk on a loose lead while you're at it. Their new owners will love you for it."

"Can I really?" Terry's pale blue eyes lighted up. "Train 'em? Me?" His grin nearly split his face.

"Terry, you already *have* trained 'em. To sit." Miami smiled. "Let's see how you do on the leash thing. I'll hang the puppy collar and leash on the shed and you can take 'em out when you have time, how's that?"

He simply beamed at her, all words banished by his excitement. Miami nodded at the spotlessly clean sawdust in the run. "Thanks for cleaning it up. You want to help with feeding, long as you're here?"

Terry nodded, still wordless.

"Great." Miami headed for the shed. "The puppies' food is in the house. On the kitchen counter in a green bowl. Want to get it for me?"

"You bet, right away." Terry took off, leaving the screen door swinging open in his wake. "Hey, close the door," Miami called, but he was long gone.

She had the pans all laid out and was measuring kibble into them when she heard the sound of tires on gravel. Immediately, the kenneled dogs began to bark. Who? Miami peered through the shed's window, spied the green and white of a Sheriff's Department car. Mike? She tossed the scoop back into the kibble and stepped out into the kennel yard. It wasn't Mike. Rob. She recognized the lanky, graying deputy as he closed the driver's-side door. The other guy, short and young with a wisp of a blond moustache, she didn't recognize.

Rob waved and walked over, looking around warily.

Small alarm bells went off in Miami's brain. "What's up?" She closed the door behind her. "Do you need dogs?"

"Hi, Miami." Rob didn't stop scanning the kennel and house area. "Doesn't Terry Chenier work for you?"

"Yeah." Puzzled. "He's . . ."

Terry pushed through the kitchen's screen door with the green bowl of puppy food in his hands. For one second, all motion in the yard seemed to cease, as if someone had paused a cosmic VCR. Then Terry flung the bowl from him and bolted around the side of the old house. At the same instant, Rob shouted, "Halt, you're under arrest," and charged past Miami, the young deputy at his heels. The young deputy was fumbling with his gun.

"Hold on a damn minute!" Miami charged after them.

Jeff and Jingo came around the corner of the house. Jeff was looking after Terry but Jingo instantly spotted the officers charging toward them. He bristled and thundered a challenge. The two deputies screeched to a halt.

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"Get that man," Rob yelled. "He's under arrest."

"What's going on here?" Jeff grabbed Jingo by the collar. "Jingo, *sit.* Good sit. What do you want with Terry?"

The two deputies skirted Jeff and the still-bristling, now sitting, Jingo and charged on after Terry, who had vanished into the brushy tangle of sassafras, laurel, and young ash and hemlock that shrouded the grown-over mine land above the kennel. Jeff looked at Miami. "What's going on here?"

"I have no idea." Miami joined him. "Terry was playing with the puppies. I guess he came to apologize for not showing up. I sent him to get the puppy chow and then Rob showed up. Terry bolted."

"I don't think they're going to catch up to him." One corner of Jeff's lip quirked upward, although his eyes were worried. "Terry moves like a deer. Don't ever plan on outrunning him. And silent, too. He's something in the woods." Jeff looked down at Jingo, who was staring after the deputies, the hair across his shoulders still half erect, ears up. "You got good instincts for a cop dog, I guess." He rubbed Jingo's ears. "But you're supposed to be on their side."

Jingo flattened his ears and looked up adoringly at Jeff, butt wriggling, tongue lolling as he panted a grin.

Miami watched the woods as Jeff put Jingo away. Sure enough, Rob and his partner slogged out of the lengthening shadows a half-hour later. Rob, red-faced and sweating, glared at Jeff. "Your damn dog cost us an arrest."

"What do you want with Terry?" Jeff leaned against the corner of the shed, arms crossed.

"Sheriff wants to talk to him." Rob glanced at his young partner, whose attention was shifting between the run where Jingo stared at him and the brushy hillside. "In connection with the kidnapping of the Grimes kid," he finished.

"Terry?" Jeff laughed. "You're kidding. He wouldn't hurt a kid."

"You sure about that?" Rob spat on the ground. "You check his record when you hired him?" He looked from Jeff to Miami. "He's a registered sex offender."

Miami stared at Rob, a series of images of Terry with the dogs flitting through her brain. "I don't believe it."

"Yeah, well. Look it up." Rob spat again. "I guess it happened in Louisiana. Some years back. They never really change." His eyes narrowed. "Was he here all day today?"

Jeff was looking at her. "No." Miami swallowed, thinking of his lie about forgetting it was Tuesday. "He . . . he came in late. Sometime this afternoon."

"Yeah." Rob glanced back up at the woods where shadows crept down the slope. "You call us if he comes back. We're still hoping we can find that kid . . . alive," he said grimly. "You got our number."

"Wait a minute." Miami shook her head, feeling numb. "What makes you think he had anything to do with the Grimes kidnap-

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ping? Besides the sex-offender thing?"

"Witness." Rob shrugged. "Turns out a bunch of folks have seen him hanging around that development lately. Oh, we got him all right. Or we did." He glared at Jingo, who stared back, ears and tail erect. "Come on, Benny. Let's go. You call us *right* quick, if you see him."

Miami looked at Jeff as the two deputies climbed into their car and pulled out of the yard. "I can't believe it."

Jeff shook his head, his expression grave.

"I'd better make up some more food for the pups." Miami headed for the house, her shoulders hunched. A witness? She still didn't believe it. As she scooped kibble into the bowl, heated broth, and measured out supplements, her mind kept circling back to Terry, his arms full of joyful puppies in the run, so pleased with that quick, happy *sit*. She thought of the small yellow and white striped polo shirt she had offered to Katy and closed her eyes. Not possible. It just wasn't.

"Miami?"

She jumped. "Didn't hear you come in, Jeff." The pan of broth was boiling furiously. She lifted it from the stove, hissed as the handle scorched her fingers, slopped scalding broth as she nearly dropped it.

"No reason to think King would have done any better than Katy. Or that whatever they found would have cleared Terry."

"Whatever." She ladled steaming broth into the bowl, softening the kibble.

"Don't be so tough on yourself."

She didn't answer, and after a moment, she heard him leave. Of course the kibble was now too hot. She dished it into the puppy pans and while she waited for it to cool, she called Mike's cell.

"Hey, Miami." He sounded tired. "Rob said they just missed Terry."

"I bet that's not quite what he said."

"Well, yeah." Mike sighed. "Big surprise to me, too. First thing we did was run a check to see if we had any registered offenders local. And there he was."

"What happened, Mike?" Miami let her breath out slowly. "In Louisiana, I mean?"

"I don't know. He did five years."

He must have come north when they let him out. "Find out, will you?" Miami tested the kibble with her finger. "I just . . . I'm just having a hard time believing this, is all."

"Bauer took a photo around the neighborhood. A couple of neighbors said they'd seen him in the woods outside the fence early this morning . . . there's a hiking trail there where they jog, I guess. And a couple of regular joggers have seen him off and on all spring. The kid recognized him right off and Mom said she was pretty sure it was him. You know, for all that Terry seems pretty slow, he picked the one place in that fence that you can't see well from the house."

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"And it's a good reason to think he didn't do it, Mike. You know Terry. It takes him five minutes to count to ten."

A long silence hummed on the phone. "Miami, people can do the damnedest things," Mike said finally. He sounded old. "You just never know. Some of the nicest people . . . And we got a footprint off that trail where this jogger said he'd seen Terry. Sheriff'd shoot me for telling you, but it sure looks like it's his. We got a search warrant for that dump he lives in and picked up another pair of sneakers for a rough match. He had ten pairs, all identical. Half of 'em brand-new, still in the box. Weird." Mike let his breath out. "He was there, Miami."

"Mike, I should have brought King. I know King is a lot more search dog than Katy." Miami clutched the phone. "We need to go back there with King. It hasn't been that long . . . not even a day. There's a good chance he can sort out what happened. I messed Katy up."

"No can do." Mike sighed. "See, my boss figures Katy didn't track good because she knows Terry."

"What?" Miami's mouth fell open. "Mike, that's nuts, you know it could have been Jeff or *me* with that kid and it wouldn't have made any difference to Katy. I sent her out to find the *kid,* not the person with him. Dogs don't lie."

"I know, I know. But you know and I know that you can't talk sense to Jim, and he sure has Dad right there with him on the subject of tracking Rottweilers. So forget about getting a second try here, Miami. Sorry. And, Miami . . ." Mike hesitated. "No ransom call yet. Usually they come in pretty quick."

"Maybe they're waiting, letting the family sweat."

"That, they're doing," Mike said drily. "Sweating. God, I hope it's never me, wondering who's got my kid, what they're doing to him."

Miami closed her eyes, swallowed. "If Bauer thinks it's Terry, he's going to stop looking anywhere else."

"What if it *is* Terry, Miami? Look, I gotta go."

"Bye," Miami said mechanically. Hung up. Turned around to find Jeff behind her. She related Mike's news, watching his face, waiting for the denial in his eyes.

"Come on, Jeff. Terry wouldn't ever . . ."

He merely looked at her steadily. "We don't really know much about him, Miami."

"But he's . . ."

"He's good with the dogs. He's cheerful, friendly, autistic or retarded or something, and works hard for us." Compassion glinted in Jeff's eyes. "That's all we *know,* Miami. Yeah, I don't believe it either. But we need to keep it in mind. What I just said."

Miami didn't sleep much that night. She kept dreaming about Katy in the woods, chasing a yellow striped polo shirt that dashed

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and darted through the woods, and sometimes turned into Terry with the puppies in his arms. She woke up sweating after he turned into a monster and ate the puppies, the sheets knotted around her. Katy snored at the foot of the bed. The faintest glimmer of gray lined the eastern horizon. She untangled herself and got up, aching with fatigue. Tiptoeing downstairs, followed by the yawning Katy, she heated water on the stove, made herself a cup of coffee, and carried it out into the yard.

Jingo stood up in his run, the one closest to the house, and looked, but didn't bark. The birds were tuning up, singing the dawn in. Miami sat down on the top step of the porch, tired, letting the gentle light seep into her. Katy sniffed the corner of the porch and ambled across the yard. Checking scent posts.

Stopped. Sniffed. Followed a track for a few yards. Miami sat up, the hairs tingling on the back of her neck. Someone had been here . . . somebody Katy knew, not a stranger.

Katy's head came around in that fishhook jerk and she tracked, head down, almost waddling, nose to the ground, to the puppy pen, cast about for a few minutes, then tracked that invisible trail across the yard to the shed door, turned, headed past the house up the slope to the woods. Off to say "Hi"?

Miami set her mug down, got to her feet, and followed.

Katy hesitated as she neared the edge of the brush. All night, cooling air had poured down this slope, dislodging scent, spreading it downhill. She worked the edge of the scrub for a few minutes, sorting out the scent picture, while Miami stood still, holding her breath. Suddenly, Katy seemed to have made up her mind and she veered left, trotting now, sure of her track, heading westward a dozen yards below the scrub in the mowed stubble beyond the yard. The hillside sloped down to the creek that drained it. There, not far from the creek banks, stood the old hay barn. Built a hundred years ago or more, it still stood, roof shakes blown away by forgotten storms, siding gone, leaving gaps like missing teeth in a grin. The main beams sagged, giving the ageing structure the shape of a swaybacked old nag. One winter, the whole thing would come down under a heavy, wet snow. But you could still make out the hex sign over the door, and the faint traces of the tobacco ad on the side. The big door hung by one corner from its rusted track.

Katy arrowed past it, beneath sagging timbers. Miami broke into a run, because Katy wasn't tracking anymore; she was bounding along, air-scenting, her tail stub wagging furiously. By the time she charged beneath the old barn's timbers, Katy was uttering the mix of growl and howl that was her greeting somewhere in the dark shadows at the back of the building. Miami picked her way past fallen stanchions, the ruins of old mangers and feed bins, seeing ancient drifts of trash left by drinking teens over the past decades. Overhead, swallows darted out into the morning light,

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wakened early by the disturbance. From above, lost in shadows, a screech owl *tock*ed. Small things rustled, hiding. Miami squeezed between missing planks in what had been the milk room. An old bulk tank hulked in one corner, draped thickly with dust and cobwebs, and the jumbled pipes of old milk lines formed a twisted sculpture along one wall. Katy gleefully wrestled a weather-stained mound of blue nylon sleeping bag beneath the tangle.

Terry's clear, boyish laughter filled the soft morning shadows. For a moment, Miami hung in the shadows, watching Terry as he sat up, his face soft with happiness as he grabbed Katy by the jowls, giggling as he tried to evade her enthusiastic tongue. *He's good with the dogs. That's all we know, Miami.* Jeff's words whispered at the back of her brain. She thought about the young detective yesterday afternoon, unsnapping his holster.

She stepped out into the slowly growing light. "Terry?"

He started and spun, much faster than Miami could have imagined. Katy hopped backward, whining, worried. For a moment, he froze, facing Miami, half crouched in the tangle of sleeping bag, his eyes wide, ringed with white, the eyes of a cornered animal just before it attacks. He had his clasp knife in his hand, its four-inch blade open, gleaming.

"Hey, Terry, it's okay." Her voice wavered just a hair and Katy whined again. "Terry, I just came out here to talk to you. It's all right."

His shoulders drooped and he lowered his eyes. Miami relaxed a little, sweat prickling under her arms. "Oh, Terry, what did you *do* yesterday?"

The lanky man crumpled to the floor like a kid, breaking into sobs, his face in his arms, his back in a fetal curl. "The baby . . ." His words came out muffled, thick with sobs. "I didn't make him die. I didn't, Miami. I was trying . . . I was . . . I was trying . . ." The open knife winked on the dirt floor.

Ice ran through Miami's veins, but she made herself step closer, squatted beside the weeping man. Picked up the knife, closed it silently, and slipped it into her pocket. Fingerprints, she thought. Evidence. And didn't give a damn. "Terry, it'll be all right." What a lie. "Terry, can you take me to the baby? We need to find him." She tried to keep the urgency out of her voice. "That's the only way to make things better, Terry."

"No, no, no!" His voice rose to a wail. "I was bad. They'll punish me. They said so. They'll hurt me again."

Go back and get your cell, the logical part of her mind snapped at her. *Call Mike at home. Tell him. Do it now!* Her head spun and she realized she was murmuring nonsense words, the way she might to a bitch struggling to whelp a huge puppy.

"Terry." She put a snap of casual authority into her voice, the same tone she'd use to send him to clean runs or wash pans. "Get

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up. We're going to go find it. The baby. Katy will come, too."

He tensed and she held her breath, but then he scrambled to his feet, nearly knocking her backward, shedding the sleeping bag. "I hid him." He looked down at the dirt, his disheveled hair hanging loose around his face. "I covered him up. I was bad, Miami. They're going to punish me."

Yes. They sure were. "Terry, I'll help you. I'll talk to them." And say what? She stood, brushing powdery wood dust and old, dry dirt from her jeans, the knife a stone in her pocket. "Let's go." She took his arm, her voice as casually confident as she could make it, her heart a black hole in her chest.

He led her through the woods, up over the crest of the hill, and through the narrow creek valley beyond, following game trails through the woods as if he had a map in his head. The young ash, hemlock, and hickory trees gave way to mature oaks, and Miami realized suddenly where they were. In the woods on the back side of the new development. While it took many miles of meandering county road to get there from the kennel, Terry's shortcut took only an hour of hiking.

He slowed as they climbed the gentle slope of the knoll, looking sideways at her now and again, his head still down, shoulders drooping, like a dog who has just peed on the carpet. They finally reached a narrow little winter creek, its flow already dried to a trickle in a muddy bed of rotting leaves. Hemlocks cloaked the banks, their bare roots thrusting from the carved soil of the creek bed, their branches brushing the needled ground. Terry halted. Katy nudged his leg with her nose, then peered at a huge hemlock. Her nose working, she pushed through the thick skirt of its branches.

"Katy!" Miami's voice cracked in spite of herself. She pushed in after the dog, her skin tight with dread. A mound of twigs, rotted leaves, and hemlock needles had nearly filled the dry, hidden space beneath the hemlock. Katy pawed at the end of the mound. "Katy, *no*!"

Brown. Fur. Miami stared numbly as Katy scraped twigs and needles away from a long . . . ear. A furry ear. With a gasp, Miami scrambled forward, brushing dirt and debris madly away. A long nose emerged, a head with glassy, staring eyes. "A fawn. Ohmygod, Terry!"

She burst into tears, on her knees in the dirt, the hemlock boughs scratching her back. Katy whined distress, pushing in to lick her face, showering them both with dead needles from the branches above. Terry cried, too, on his knees at the edge of the tree, his face in his hands.

"I didn't, I didn't kill it," he kept repeating over and over. "It was hurt. I didn't kill it. I tried to make it better."

As she brushed more twigs and dirt away, she saw the bright blue vet-wrap tape that they used as bandages at the kennel. Beneath them, the fawn's rear legs were grossly swollen and old,

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dark blood crusted the hair. Dog attack? She could make out bite wounds on its flank and sides. The dogs' teeth would have penetrated the peritoneum, and the fawn had probably died of sepsis. It had escaped the dogs, and Terry had found it when it was dying, too weak to flee. That's why the joggers had seen him, why he had been "hanging around" the development.

"Oh, Terry, it's all right." She wanted to burst into song as she scrambled out from under the branches, filthy, her hair full of twigs. "I told you it would be all right. They're not going to punish you. You only tried to help. Terry?" She took his face between her hands. "Listen to me. It's okay. Really."

"Really?" He blinked at her.

"Really." She got to her feet, pulled him up with her. "Now we have to go back and talk to Mike. We need to tell him about the fawn."

"No." He yanked his arm free and backed away. "They won't listen to me. They'll punish me."

"I told you . . . you were trying to help."

"*They* won't listen." For a moment, his face was utterly mature, hard-edged and full of a sere knowledge. "I need to get away."

"No!" They'd have an APB out for him, and how long would it take? What would happen if some cop yelled "Halt!" and Terry didn't? Or if they cornered him and he panicked and tried to fight? "Terry, listen," she said desperately. "I promise that I won't let them punish you, okay? I *promise,* Terry."

He wanted to believe her, but that sudden, hard knowledge didn't entirely leave his face.

"Terry, please?" Miami swallowed. "I don't want you to leave. Jeff doesn't want you to leave. Terry, if you stay, if you talk to Mike and go with him, let them keep you where Mike works for a while, I'll keep Einstein. For you. You can train him. I promise, Terry. Okay? I promise."

"Miami, I'm scared." He looked at her finally. "They're gonna put me in jail. You promise you'll make them let me go?"

"I promise," Miami said. "I promise, Terry."

Belief flickered in his pale eyes. "Okay." He hugged himself, his thin shoulders hunched. "Okay," he whispered again. He put his hand on Katy's head and she licked it. "I'll tell Mike."

The walk back to the kennel wasn't long enough. Miami spent the miles running scenario after scenario through her head, and most of them were ugly. Jeff met them in the yard. The etched lines of fear in his face stabbed Miami with instant guilt.

"I didn't have time to leave you a note," she said. She sent Terry to feed and play with the puppies while she told Jeff what had happened. "I'm sorry, Jeff. I didn't realize we'd be gone that long and it was too late to go back for my cell, once Katy took off."

"Miami . . ." Jeff paused, a range of emotion flickering across his

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face too fast for her to identify it. "Let's just say . . . I do worry about you. Like a father. Okay?"

"Yeah." She looked away, bit her lip. "I'm sorry. Next time, I'll think. I'd better call Mike."

Mike was home and answered on the first ring. He listened silently as she related the important events. When she had finished, he remained silent. "Mike?" she asked hesitantly. "You still there?"

He sighed. "Miami . . ." He paused briefly. "I'm on my way. At least Jeff has some common sense. Will you promise me . . . to use yours? If I do this your way?"

"Yes."

She and Jeff walked down to the run where Terry tumbled with the puppies. Three of them were playing tug of war with him, hanging on fiercely to a knotted length of rope. For a moment, Miami thought he had forgotten all about the fawn and Mike but when he looked up at them, his eyes were bleak.

"He's comin'?"

Miami nodded. "Just Mike, Terry. He'll be here in a few minutes."

It normally took Mike fifteen minutes to make the trip from his place over to the kennel by the gravel shortcut through the old mining land. He made it in eleven. As the green and white car turned into the driveway, Terry let go of the rope and the three puppies carried it triumphantly away, circling as they continued their game with each other, growling in their falsetto puppy voices, their little tail stubs sticking straight up. One of them was the little male.

"Remember, Terry," Miami said as Mike got stiff-legged out of the car. "I'm going to keep Einstein for you and you'll get to train him." She felt rather than saw Jeff's look. Terry was nodding, but his eyes were on Mike and he looked far from certain. She stepped forward to put a hand on his arm, saw Mike's eyes narrow. This was not what he had meant by common sense, obviously.

The handcuffs almost blew everything. Terry's eyes got wide as a cornered deer's and Miami tensed, waiting for him to bolt, but he didn't; he let Mike fasten on the cuffs, shaking so hard that Mike had to help him into the back of the car. She rode in with Mike and Jeff followed. All the way into Butler Park she wanted to reassure Terry, wanted to tell him it would be okay, but every word that came to her lips felt so utterly hollow that she couldn't say it.

What happened? She wanted to shout those words out loud. *What did you do back there? Why didn't you tell us?*

At the courthouse, she and Jeff got shut out instantly as the mechanics of justice closed around Terry. He vanished, escorted into the back of the building by another detective, and the paperwork began. Miami gave her statement to Mike, and then they were done, nothing more to do there.

"I'm going to go see if Asa McClelland is in his office," Jeff told her outside. "He used to do criminal law before he started han-

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dling business stuff. He might be willing to help out here."

Miami let him go, opting to wait for Mike to emerge. She leaned against the fender of Jeff's Jeep, watching the last of the morning shadows vanish as the sun neared its zenith.

A teenaged girl sold lemonade and hot dogs to the first early lunch-hour patrons a couple of yards away. She looked vaguely familiar, but Miami couldn't place her. McClelland must have been out of the office. Or something.

A new SUV pulled to the curb down the block and three people got out of it. With a start, Miami recognized the missing boy's parents. Come to look at Terry? Hope leaped in her chest. A face was different than a photo. . . . Surely they would tell Bauer right now that Terry wasn't the one who stole their child.

Grimes looked awful, as if he had aged ten years overnight. In the backyard, yesterday, he had stood straight, alpha-male, dominating everyone on the scene. Now, his entire body drooped, and his flesh seemed to sag on his bones as if his well-cared-for muscles had dissolved overnight. He looked . . . broken.

The change in his son was just as dramatic. Jonathan stood straight, his hand on his father's arm as if supporting him. He looked, Miami thought, like a young dog in the pack who had just displaced the aging alpha. Mrs. Grimes noticed Miami and hurried over.

"Oh, they caught him, did you hear?" She clutched Miami's arm. "He'll tell us where Brandon is, won't he?"

"He didn't do it," Miami said gently. "It was someone else."

"He did it." The woman's voice rose. "I saw him do it, I saw him take my son."

"You haven't looked at him yet," Miami said, ice forming in her gut. "Wasn't he hidden by the bushes? Are you sure you got a good look at the man?"

"Let's go," Grimes said, but all authority had fled his voice and it sounded like a whine rather than a command.

Miami watched Grimes climb the steps like an old man. Broken. That was the only word that came to her.

"Wow, I heard that someone kidnapped Jon's little brother." The girl from the hot-dog stand had edged closer. "Hi, I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Amy. I talked to you about dogs when you did that demonstration at the school this spring, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Miami smiled at her. "You own the basset hound."

"Yeah, and you were right." Amy smiled, her blue eyes sparkling. "He can follow a track really easily . . . just not the track you want him to follow." She laughed. "We follow a lot of rabbits. But I'm thinking about getting a puppy . . . my mom said yes, finally . . . and maybe I'll come take lessons from you."

"Any time," Miami said. "When you get your puppy call me and I'll talk to you about early training."

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"I will!" Amy beamed, then her smile faltered. "Did you track the kidnapper for the police?"

"We didn't find him." Miami sighed. "We tried."

"I heard they caught the guy . . . some sex weirdo." She shivered. "I can't believe it . . . maybe over in Pittsburgh, a big city like that . . . but not here."

"It wasn't," Miami said flatly. "They don't know who did it yet."

"Really?" Amy looked suddenly troubled. "They really don't have any leads?"

"No." Miami watched the girl bite her lip, hesitate, then start to turn away. "Amy? He could still be alive . . . but it's been more than twenty-four hours."

"I know." She looked down. "But . . . I mean . . . I don't know anything. It's just a thought . . . and I could get . . . someone . . . in trouble."

"Sometimes loyalty to a friend isn't the right thing," Miami said softly.

"Well . . ." Amy scuffed her sandaled feet, her eyes fixed on her neon pink toenails. "I . . . it's just that Jon . . . well, we were . . . sort of friends for a while. And . . ." She looked up at Miami. "His father doesn't think Jon is really his son, you know. He makes all kinds of nasty little comments all the time. . . . I didn't really believe Jon when he told me, but then I heard him do it a couple of times, right in front of me. And Jon was always talking about how his dad . . . Mr. Grimes . . . didn't need him anymore because he got himself a real son . . . and . . . you know . . . when I heard that Brandon was gone . . . I thought . . . Jon will be happy." She looked up at Miami, her expression stricken. "Is that an evil thing to think? I mean, it's not like I think he really had anything to do with it. . . . I just thought it. Don't tell anyone, okay? He already has a bad time at school. People pick on him, push him around." She blushed. "I guess . . . that's sort of why I hung around with him, you know? I have a lot of friends, I'm on the first cheerleading squad. I just thought . . . you know . . . that would sort of help him out. But he never really tried, you know? If you say anything . . . well, in this town peoople are really quick to say bad things about folk."

"Yeah." And it was happening to Terry. "If you had reason to think that way," Miami spoke slowly and deliberately, "then it's not an evil thing to think." She watched the girl's eyes flicker and slide away from hers, troubled. "Amy," she said softly, "if you know, or even guess something, you need to tell me. Even if it gets a friend in trouble."

"Have you ever done that?" Amy's blush darkened. "I mean, everyone's so quick to say stuff like that—do the right thing. But you know they'd never really do it themselves."

"I did. Long time ago." Miami held her eyes. "To a man I loved. Because he was going to kill someone. And Amy, there's a price," she said softly. "I won't lie about that. I've carried it with me, but the price for not doing anything would have been . . . worse."

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The girl looked away, her eyes focused on the street, unseeing, chewing on her bottom lip, a deep crease forming between her delicate brows.

"It's just . . ." Amy pressed her lips together briefly, her eyes shadowed. "Jon asked me to go with him to the Winter Formal, you know. I said no. I mean, I was hanging around with him, but we weren't hooked up or anything. I was just being . . . you know . . . nice. He got real . . . angry." She shivered. "It was kind of scary. I mean . . . everybody on the football team pushes him around and he just lets it happen, but I remember thinking that if he had a gun, he'd have shot me right there." She hugged herself briefly. "After that, he just stopped talking to me. But he didn't *do* anything, okay? Coming!" She spun away to serve the man in jeans and T-shirt waiting impatiently at the hot-dog cart.

Miami stared at her absently as the girl tonged a fat sausage into a roll, smiling and sunny once more.

The Grimes family were leaving. They walked in stiff formation, not touching. Jon led the way, car keys dangling in his hand. As he trotted down the stairs, his parents paused. Mrs. Grimes's voice rose and for a moment she and her husband stood still, her voice shrill and accusing, his low, his tone almost apologetic. His shoulders jerked and he turned, hurrying down the stairs and past Miami without a look. He looked worse than he had going in.

Mrs. Grimes followed, clutching a fresh wad of tissue, but her eyes gleamed with an anger that Miami hadn't seen before. Miami stepped forward. "Excuse me."

The woman paused, gave Miami a glazed look. "Oh, you." She blinked. "He wouldn't tell us. He wouldn't tell us anything."

"I need to bring a different dog to your house," she said urgently. "Right now."

"There's no point." Her eyes brimmed. "Aren't you listening to me? They got the man and he's a pervert. Retarded. He won't say what he did with Brandon." She pressed her hands to her face, soggy tissue sticking to her fingers. "The sheriff thinks Brandon is already dead. I hate him. You can see it in his face."

"And if he's not dead?" Miami spoke urgently. "If they're *wrong* about this man, then he's still out there, Mrs. Grimes, maybe still alive."

"Why should he be wrong?" She blew her nose. "He's the sheriff."

Miami drew a breath, counted to ten. "Even trained professionals can make mistakes." She forced a smile. "What does it hurt if we try again?"

"Lewis won't . . ." She glanced after her husband, who stood at the end of the block at the curb as if he had forgotten where he was going. "I . . . I don't *care* what Lewis says anymore." She balled the tissue into a wad as her fists clenched. "He brought us here . . . he brought Brandon . . . I told him I didn't want to move out to

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this godforsaken backwoods." Her delicate face hardened, ageing her instantly. "Yes. Bring your dog out. Why not?"

"Mrs. Grimes." Miami drew a deep breath. "I need one thing from you. Don't tell either your husband or your son until we get there. Please?"

"Why not?" She looked startled.

"It will save argument." Miami cut her off. "And one of them . . . without knowing . . . might somehow tip off the person who has your son. It's really important." She stressed the words. "We'll bring the dog out soon. Just go home and wait."

"Just wait." The last traces of softness vanished from the woman's face. "That's all we've been doing, isn't it? No, I won't say anything to anyone. Hurry up, please. I'll call down to the gate to let you in as soon as I get home." She brushed past Miami and hurried to catch up with her husband, who still stood at the curb like a wind-up toy waiting to be rewound.

Miami drew a deep breath as she caught sight of Jeff striding down the block from the direction of McClelland's downtown office. She ran to meet him, explaining her wild, crazy, impossible theory as they walked, praying he'd side with her.

"I think you're wrong," Jeff told her. "But what have we got to lose?"

She hugged him, blessing him for backing her. Mike wasn't going to be as easy.

But to her surprise, he was. "I'm gonna get fired if you're wrong about this," was all he said. "I'm not on shift until five, so I'll follow you out to the kennel and we'll go together. I don't see Terry as a killer, but your theory is pretty wild. Still . . ." He shrugged, and caught Miami's arm as Jeff went around to the driver's side of the Jeep. "Thanks for asking for help, Miami," he murmured. Then he turned away abruptly and headed for his car.

They loaded both King and Katy, and they reached the gate to the development in just under an hour. The guard flagged them through without a second look this time . . . different guard. Mrs. Grimes was waiting at the door when they arrived, her eyes bright with hope. "Lewis is lying down," she told them in a low voice. "He took a pill." She stepped onto the front porch, the yellow and white striped shirt in her hands. "This is the same one as before." Doubt clouded her face. "Is that . . . do you need a different one?"

"That will be fine, don't worry." Jeff took it from her, his expression compassionate. "Scent doesn't go away that fast." He didn't tell her that King was trained to scent corpses, that this was what they were really looking for. Instead he took the shirt and led King around the house to the backyard.

He didn't start him at the cut fence but rather in the middle of the yard. He unsnapped the short leather lead, hand on King's col-

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lar, and held out the rumpled shirt. "King. Go find."

The big Rott snuffled at the shirt, rooting at it with his broad muzzle, his dark eyes intent, ears alert—smelling Katy, Mom, her, all kinds of people. And the missing boy.

King started working, quartering across the yard sniffing, head in the air, then worked back along the fence, paused at the cut, crossed through the gaping, still-curled back wire. Followed Katy's track for a dozen yards while Miami held her breath. But then he stopped and worked along the eaves of the oak wood. Back.

Jeff moved with him, through the fence, out into the eaves of the woods. The sky was clouding over. Miami looked up, shading her eyes. Rain coming, thunderstorm, judging by the towering clouds. A gust of wind whipped through the trees, making the oaks sigh. A few twigs pattered down and Miami wrapped her arms around herself, wondering what they were going to find.

"What's he doing?" Mike murmured.

"Sorting out old scent patterns." Miami watched the big dog circle farther from the fence line, quartering, ears alert, working hard. "If he . . . if he scents a corpse, he'll indicate. Even though Jeff sent him after the boy."

"How do you know if he does?'

"He digs at the spot," Miami said softly. She caught her breath as King hesitated. His head went up, nose working. "He's got something," she breathed.

"Damn," Mike said softly.

But Miami shook her head. "Not a body. I don't think so." She held her breath. King quartered back and forth briefly, working the air currents, head high.

"Live scent," Jeff said softly.

"Well, he played in the woods all the time. Is he just smelling that?" Mrs. Grimes had clambered through the cut in the fence, clutching herself as if she was cold.

"No." Jeff's eyes never left King. The dog's back and forth quartering was narrowing. "This is fresh."

"It can't be . . . " Mrs. Grimes pressed her fists to her mouth. "You can see the house from here. He can't be right here. We looked everywhere!"

King gave one deep-throated bark and leaped the six-foot deer fence into the backyard of the house beyond, two doors down from the Grimes home. He trotted to the back door, then began to trot back and forth along the back of the house. Mike had his cell out. "Who lives here?" he snapped at Mrs. Grimes.

"That's the McCrae house. But they're on vacation. In Europe. For a month," Mrs. Grimes said uncertainly. "Why is the dog in their yard?"

"I want you to go back into the house." Mike glanced at her. "You and your husband stay there."

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"No! He's in there? He can't be. They have an alarm system and everything." She took a step toward the house, her arms still wrapped tightly around herself. "You're saying he was right *here?* All this time?" Her voice quavered. "My baby?"

"Miami?" Mike snapped.

"We don't know what's going on here." Miami took her by the arm. "You need to let them handle it."

"I won't," the woman wailed, but she didn't resist as Miami hauled her, stumbling in her heeled sandals, back along the fence. "How can he be in there?" she gasped as Miami helped her through the fence and into her own backyard. "Jonathan was friends with their son and he went over there sometimes. Not Brandon . . . they don't have a young child for him to play with. Why would . . . ?"

"Where is Jonathan? In the house?" Miami opened the back door, tension rippling up and down her spine.

"I suppose so." The woman sounded suddenly uncertain. "I think he went off to his room while I was on the phone to the gate. He spends all his time in his room. . . . I didn't really pay any attention to him after that."

He'd heard her on the phone. "Go see if he's in his room," Miami snapped. "Hurry." She had her cell out, punched in Mike's number.

The gunshot shattered the silence, the hard report of a large-caliber rifle. Miami shoved the woman through the half-open door and tumbled in after her, skidding a hooked rug across polished oak flooring. Breakfast nook. Window. She looked through it, her stomach knotted. Couldn't see beyond the next-door neighbor's yard, didn't hear anything. "Call nine-one-one," she yelled, bolting through the house, flinging the front door open. "Tell them there's a shooting." Mike must have already called for backup, must have, must have.

Katy was on her feet in her crate, ears up, her entire body alert. Miami slipped the collar on as Katy leapt out of the crate, snapped on the short traffic lead. "Close," she commanded and the dog moved obediently to her side as they dashed across the neighbor's front yard, weaving between the ornamental shrubs and the siding. Feeling damn naked. How long until someone showed up? No easy route to the development from town. Fifteen minutes? Long enough for people to die.

Someone shouted behind the house, high-pitched, a young voice. Miami and Katy dashed across the landscaped space between the houses, leaping a tiny, trickling stream flowing over polished rocks to reach the house where King had indicated. She signaled Katy to a *down* and inched forward until she could peek around the corner of the house. Mike! He sprawled in the middle of the yard, down and still. Jeff crouched in front of him, as if shielding him, holding King by the collar. Miami's gut clenched at the red stain of blood on Mike's tan shirt. She couldn't see his face, couldn't tell . . .

"That's all Daddy ever wanted." Jonathan's voice, harsh and shrill,

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came from the back of the house. "His very own son. And I wasn't it, and by the time he figured that out, it wouldn't have been PC to throw me out on the street. Believe me, he's nothing if not PC."

Miami unsnapped Katy's lead, took the dog's broad head in her hands, and pressed her face briefly against the dog's. Said a silent prayer. "Wait," she commanded. Katy grinned at her and wagged her tail, ears alert, eyes on Jeff out on the lawn. Miami edged back from the corner and took off around the front of the house. The kid sounded as if he was on the ragged edge. She rounded the corner, slowed as she neared the back of the house on the far side from Katy. Bark dust here and low-pruned azaleas. No cover. She hugged the wall, trying not to make a sound as she inched toward the rear corner of the house.

"Oh, Daddy put up with me. He had to. People would have disapproved if he'd kicked me out. Everybody knew my mom had died. So he just put up with me, like a bad choice on the stock market. Just get me to eighteen and I was on my own. He could tell people after that it wasn't his fault, just bad blood from my mother. Who at least gave a damn, even if she was a crackhead." The boy laughed, a cracked, ragged sound that raised the hairs on the back of Miami's neck. Jeff had seen her, but couldn't see Katy from where he crouched with King. He was carefully not looking at her, but the hard line of his shoulders betrayed his tension.

"It has been *so* much fun watching dear Daddy disintegrate. You know it was just a prank at first. I told Branny that we were going to come out and say boo. You know, I thought about it, too. It would have been such fun . . . after he'd made a fool of himself panicking, calling the cops, and throwing his weight around. What could he do to me? Make me stay in my room?" The kid's laughter shrilled again. "But you know what?" His voice dropped. "This is a lot more fun. I don't think he gets Branny back, now."

"Look, nobody's dead." Jeff pitched his voice low, the way he'd talk to an aggressive dog. "You can get through this, Jonathan. You haven't burned any bridges yet."

Which meant Mike was still alive. Miami's heart leaped.

"You need to just lay down the gun and we'll sort this out."

"Shut up with that crap!"

Miami tensed at the shriek. *Don't push him, Jeff!*

"It's too damn late now; you think I don't know they'll toss me in and throw away the key? Daddy'll make sure of that. Everybody will feel sorry for him . . . mother ruined him, not your fault." He mimicked a deep, compassionate voice. "Hard on you, old boy. Oh no." He snickered. "It's game-over time. Only I'm not gonna go shoot up a school full of ignorant kids. I'm going to put the bullets where they matter. You take the dog with you," he yelled. "The cop stays here. You tell Daddy to get out here right now. Or I'll put a thirty-thirty bullet into little darling Brandon's head. Let him

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think about what that'll look like and let's see if he's brave enough to get his butt out here. If he's too scared . . ." The kid laughed again. "He can see for himself what it looks like. And you come back with him. If I see anybody else sneaking around, I'm gonna blow little Branny's head off, you got that? I know more cops are on the way, so don't think you can pull off any stupid tricks."

Miami had eased herself to the corner. She could see him now, saw the muzzle of the rifle in his hands jerk. Jeff was quivering with tension, his eyes glued to the house, afraid to give her away by looking at her.

"You leave the dog in the house, I don't want to shoot the dog, but I will if I have to so leave it there. And hurry up. Get moving!" His voice rose to another shriek and the muzzle of the rifle jerked. "If he's not back here in five minutes, I'll finish the cop. He gets five minutes after that and it's dear little Branny's brains that go splat. Get moving! I'm counting, you hear me? I'm counting. You've already wasted thirty seconds."

Jeff stepped backward, moving like a rusty robot, tugging King with him. The dog looked up at him, tail moving uncertainly. "King," Jeff grated. "Come on."

Miami's heart pounded. Not yet, not yet, not while Jeff was out there in the middle of that mowed grass with the rifle trained on him. She said a prayer that he would guess what she had in mind; he must see Katy now, as he walked stiff-legged toward the next yard. Sirens? She heard the faint wail and her stomach lurched. Damn fool sheriff!

"Move it!" the kid screeched. "Tell 'em to stay clear or it's all over. Get Daddy's butt out here now!"

Jeff was going to do something, Miami could see it in the sudden tense of his shoulders. Damn, damn, damn.

"Katy!" She leaped away from the shelter of the corner, spun to look back at the azaleas and the bark dust as if she was speaking to a dog behind her. "Katy, guard!" She signaled at the teenager even as she threw herself sideways, rolling, praying he was a bad aim, praying he didn't just pull the trigger with the sight on Jeff's chest. She hit the ground, rolled, leg hitting something, a rock, as she rolled.

Keep moving! She rolled again, her leg tangled in something . . . a hose? . . . heard growls, the kid screaming, high-pitched and shrill as a dying rabbit, came up to her knees and tried to get to her feet. Sprawled. Looked down and realized she was bleeding . . . the dark crimson splotch on her jeans was slowly enlarging. Everything looked too clear and bright and static buzzed in her head. Mike was sitting up, his Glock out, pointed at Jonathan, who lay flat on the patio, hands over his head, making the piercing rabbit noises. Katy had her feet on his back, hackles up, doing "guard." Jeff stood over him, his hand on King's collar, the rifle, amazingly, in his hand, a big elk rifle with a scope, muzzle pointing to the sky.

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Mike struggled to his feet and limped over, his left arm hanging at his side, fumbling handcuffs from his belt.

Everything moved in jerky motion now, like an old-fashioned moving picture. Uniformed officers appeared . . . she recognized the blond one. They surrounded the kid, talking to Mike, to Jeff. The film jerked forward again and Jeff was kneeling beside her, staring at her leg. As if the touch of his eyes had turned it real, her leg started to hurt, a deep, aching burn.

"You know something," he said through clenched teeth, "if you weren't shot, I'd slap you. Hey," he yelled, "get the paramedics here fast, dammit, she's really bleeding."

"Or you could be dead. Or Mike. Ouch, watch it!" She gasped as Jeff pressed hard on her leg. "That hurts."

"Shut up. He hit an artery." He pressed harder and it was all she could do to keep from yelling at the pain.

Blood welled between his fingers, dark and glossy. Lots of blood. Bad. "He was over the edge, Jeff, he was going to kill somebody." Her words had an echo, and a buzzing like a million bees sounded in her ears. "I think," she said, as her stomach turned suddenly inside out, "that I'm going to faint."

And she did.

She woke from a dream in which she chased Katy through a dense forest to find Mike sitting beside her bed, one arm in a white canvas sling, reading a paperback in a pool of yellow light. "Sleeping Beauty wakes." He grinned at her and laid the book down. "About time. I sent Jeff home to feed the dogs." He leaned over. "Did you know we have the same blood type? You now owe me for a pint of blood. You owe several people, actually. How are you feeling?"

"My leg hurts." She lifted the sheet. It was still there, bandaged from knee to thigh under the white sheets. "Ouch." Understatement of the year. "How's your arm?"

"They patched it. I don't think I impressed the ER doc much. You did. I guess the bullet tore a good-sized artery. Missed the bone, anyway. You won't be setting off airport alarms." His grin faded. "You gave Jeff and me a scare," he said soberly.

"Jeff already told me that." Miami tried for a more comfortable position. Winced. "Did he . . . did you find his little brother?"

"Yeah, we did. Locked in a downstairs closet, but he's okay. Dirty, hungry, but I don't think he really knows what was going on." Mike let his breath out slowly. He lifted a hand, traced the curve of her cheek with one fingertip. "The kid was really round the bend, Miami. The house was set to burn. Gasoline, all kinds of flammable stuff everywhere and he'd disconnected the gas line to the stove, had the gas going. Just luck the whole thing didn't blow while we were there." He shook his head. "I guess the kid who lived there had told him the password to the alarm. He'd wired up a fuse system with a

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bunch of rocketry supplies. All set to go off. I think he planned to shoot his father and then touch it off." He drew a deep breath. "The shrinks have him now. What made you think it was him, Miami?"

"It wasn't my nerves, Mike. I should have realized I couldn't upset Katy that much. She was telling me that Brandon hadn't gone into those woods recently. Awhile ago, but not right then." She looked away. "And when I was at the fence . . . you couldn't see the house for the bushes. But I didn't think about that, because the mom was so positive about seeing the kidnapper. But she couldn't have." Miami shook her head. "If I'd waked up Jeff and we'd brought King, he'd have found him right off. But Katy ground tracks, and when she didn't find anything, I didn't think to start her anywhere else. Two witnesses said that someone had dragged the kid through the fence. If Katy was right . . . they both had to be lying. And that just didn't seem likely. But then . . . " She shrugged. "If Katy was right, and Mom couldn't really see what was going on . . . then only Jonathan had to be lying."

"I was starting to wonder about him." Mike took her hand. "I interviewed some neighbors and heard a few things about the family relationship there." He stood. "I need to get back to work. I'll come do the official report tomorrow." He leaned over her, palms on the mattress, his eyes on hers. "Miami, like I said . . . thanks for asking for help." He leaned down and his lips brushed hers. Lightly. Like a promise. "I'll see you tomorrow. And Terry's out. With an apology from the sheriff, no less."

"Bauer?" Miami laughed, and that *did* hurt. "He apologized?"

"Amazing, huh?" Mike straightened. "Terry accepted it a lot more graciously than I would have done. Jeff took him home. Oh yeah . . ." He hesitated. "I got the details on that sex-offender rap."

"What?" Miami tried to push herself into a sitting position. Mistake! She stopped with a gasp, her eyes on Mike's face. "What happened?"

"He had a girlfriend." Mike looked away. "She was fourteen. He was eighteen. Her father was the parish sheriff."

"Thanks," Miami said, thinking of how he had shivered when Mike had put cuffs on him.

"Yeah," Mike said, still not looking at her.

"It didn't happen here." But it could have. She reached, which didn't hurt too bad, touched his hand. "Of course, now I have to help him train that puppy I promised him."

"Oh great. Another one of those damn dogs around. You know, I think I owe your Katy a steak." He smiled. "I'll bring one by."

"Bring a couple by and I'll grill one for us."

"It's a date. Soon as you're out of here." Mike lifted his hand. "I'll check in, tomorrow. You know . . . I could get to like Rotts after all. Maybe."

Miami listened to the sound of his footsteps diminish. And smiled. ●

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BLOG BYTES

by Ed Gorman

http://edgormanrambles.blogspot.com

By now, most readers will be familiar with blogs, i.e. Web pages that serve as publicly accessible personal journals. The mystery world is blessed with many informative, witty ones that basically divide into two types—the general, newsy blogs and the more personal type that is largely commentary. This column will be recommending blog sites for readers of all types. The first entry will survey two news blogs and two more personal ones.

Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind is the benchmark for all news blogs. Edited by writer Sarah Weinman, *Confessions* combines hard news culled from myriad sources (book deals, movie deals, convention news) with sage and amusing commentary on the insanity known as publishing. Her Sunday column links to book reviews from around the world. If it's happening in the mystery world, you'll find it in *Confessions.* The one daily "must read" of mystery blogs. **http://www.sarahweinman.com/**

CrimeSpot is quickly becoming another "must read." Editor Graham Powell links to what each major crime blog is doing every day (even providing a quick sampling). To keep things timely, Graham updates his site four times daily. This is the single best idea I've ever heard for a mystery site. With the field adding new blogs every week, we've long been in need of somebody being a reliable traffic cop. **http://www.crimespot.net/**

Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine is one of my favorite personal blogs because it combines nostalgia with humor and the occasional wise-guy comment on the follies of today (he is particularly eloquent on the travails of Anna Nicole Smith). Bill is himself a fine mystery writer so sometimes he talks about writing matters as well. Reading *Pop Culture* is like having a good talk with an old friend. **http://billcrider.blogspot.com/**

*Mystery*File, The Crime Fiction Research Journal* falls somewhere between breezy scholarship and a nostalgia blog. Editor Steve Lewis has by now printed a few dozen overviews by various contributors about the mystery writers of yesterday. A few contemporary authors are assessed but mostly Steve and his contributors deal with writers who've left us. A wonderful review of pulp days, paperback original days, hardboiled, cozy, British writers—whew. You get the idea. Steve often illustrates his pieces with book covers to really get you in the mood for a certain era. **http://www.mysteryfile.com/**

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

BLOODY HOT

by René Appel

Translated from the Dutch by Josh Pachter

It was only nine-thirty, but the air in the living room was already heavy, hot, and humid. Kitty had opened the sliding balcony door, but the construction crew in the old office building beyond her back garden was hammering and sawing, and from somewhere in the neighborhood a stereo raised the decibel level even higher. They were turning the office building into apartments, and that meant that her peaceful mornings in the garden were a thing of the past—at least until the work was finished. Even thinking about it made her break out in a sweat, although she'd just stepped out of her second shower of the day after going out early to do some shopping.

She had the whole day to herself and no idea how to fill the time. Huib was at work and Jolie at school—wearing today a top even more revealing than usual. These fifteen- and sixteen-year-old girls must drive their teachers crazy with their low-cut belly shirts and low-rider jeans . . . especially whenever they bent over and showed their thong underwear to the world at large.

Kitty lay on the couch and let her gaze roam around the room. So this was it: her life, her world. Pretty, responsible, serene. What excitement there was came mostly from Jolie, with her unpredictable outbursts of inexplicable anger, her unreliability when it came to promises made, her adolescent laziness. The other day, Huib had actually offered her ten euros to straighten up the disaster area that was her room. "I'll do it for twenty," she'd said, the

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spoiled little brat. Thank goodness Huib hadn't given in to her.

Huib, her rock, her refuge. His job gave the family safety and security. He was a mid-level executive in the packaging industry, not exactly the sort of occupation she could brag about to her girlfriends at the tennis club, but that didn't bother her. Their house, the two cars, the expensive vacations, the lovely wardrobe from the chic boutiques of P.C. Hooft Street—that was more than enough compensation for the boring cardboard-box image her husband's profession called to mind.

Happily, they'd be able to have dinner out in the garden tonight, after the construction crew had silenced its hellish machines for the day. She'd bought what she needed for a refreshing avocado-and-shrimp salad. Hopefully Huib would make it home at a reasonable hour. He'd called around six o'clock yesterday: a meeting he had to attend, could turn out to be a long one. Wijnand, the CFO, ought to have handled it, but he'd unexpectedly had to cancel, which meant Huib had had to fill in for him. He hadn't slipped quietly between the sheets until almost two A.M. She'd pretended to be asleep—she didn't want to seem like a shrew, waiting up for him. She'd heard him in the shower before he came to bed, as if the meeting had somehow dirtied him. This morning, between quick bites of toast and sips of tea, he'd offered her an unclear report of a business deal closed over too many glasses of wine at an outdoor cafe overlooking the Amstel River.

She found herself realizing that, these last few months, he'd been delayed more and more often by meetings, visits from one of the firm's overseas representatives, or the need to finish up some rush assignment. She wondered why Wijnand didn't handle these matters himself.

The phone rang. "Kitty Schonerwoerd," she said.

"Hi, Kit! It's Leonie."

Kit. She'd always hated that childish nickname.

"It's such a gorgeous day," Leonie said. "I would *love* to go to the beach, but—wouldn't you know it?—my car's in the shop. Yours up and running?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Zandvoort won't be mobbed in the middle of the week, and at least there'll be a breeze by the sea." She blew out a breath. "It's so bloody hot here in town—just unbearable. Feel like joining me? It'd be so much cosier to go with a friend."

They settled themselves in a pair of beach chairs, as far as possible from the walkway up to the parking area. A deeply tanned beach god with a major tattoo on his right arm served them iced tea. They had brought their own beach towels, lotions, magazines, books.

Leonie pulled the current issue of *Elle* from her bag. The front

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cover promised a report on sexy summer fashions, Kitty noticed. Leonie herself was certainly sexy. She was topless, wore only a minuscule bikini bottom. Her breasts were large and full and well worth showing off. Kitty had begun to sag in recent years, so she'd kept her top on. Then again, Leonie was quite a bit younger. They'd met briefly at the tennis club several years earlier. Last month, Kitty had, to her surprise, reencountered Leonie, this time at an office party in honor of Huib's secretary Anna, a model of old-fashioned respectability, who was celebrating her twenty-fifth anniversary with the firm. Leonie's mother, it turned out, was Anna's best friend.

As Kitty gazed at Leonie, sitting there paging through her magazine with her proud breasts on display, a random memory from that party suddenly came back to her. She'd been walking down the corridor towards the ladies' room when she'd come across Huib and Leonie, huddled together, barely a few inches separating their faces. "Have you two met?" Huib had said, backing away a step. "Yes, just now," she'd said with a polite laugh. Huib had cleared his throat, and Leonie had begun to say something—Kitty couldn't remember now what it had been.

She set her book aside and closed her eyes and recalled the scene: Huib and Leonie looking shy and uncomfortable, as if they'd been caught with their hands in a cookie jar.

When she opened her eyes, a woman was settling in thirty feet away. She had two blond young children with her, a boy and a girl. As soon as she released his hand, the boy took off for the sea like a shot. "Jeremy," she shouted, "you come right back here!" The boy pretended not to hear her—he was already up to his knees in the water. The woman dropped her two heavy bags and chased after him. She dragged the frightened child back to their chairs, shaking him angrily by the arm. "Don't you *dare* go in the water by yourself!" she yelled. Jeremy burst into loud tears.

Leonie tossed down her magazine and stretched like a cat. "Late night," she yawned.

"Oh? Have a nice time?"

"Lovely."

Kitty tried to make her next questions sound casual. "What did you do? Or should I be asking *who* you did?"

Leonie smiled at her. A superior smile? "Oh, you know, just a nice night out."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

Around one, they had a sandwich and a glass of white wine in the pavilion. Kitty knew that it was dangerous for her to drink in the middle of the day, especially out in the hot sun, but she felt an irresistible compulsion to drown her suspicions. They talked about restaurants, food, recipes. Kitty described the class in Indonesian

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cooking she'd taken the previous winter.

Leonie set down her wineglass carefully. "Huib's a bit of a gourmet, isn't he?"

"Where did *that* come from? Did he tell you that?"

Leonie looked as if she'd let a secret escape her. "No, no, I'm just guessing. He looks like a man who enjoys a good meal." She laughed as if she'd said something amusing. "Shall we have another one?"

The woman had dug a deep hole in the sand for Jeremy and his sister, whose name seemed to be Viviane. The three of them sat in the hole together—one little blond head or the other peeked out occasionally over the edge. Kitty thought of beach times spent with Huib and Jolie. Huib would dig a hole and lie down in it, and Jolie would cover him with sand until only his head was visible. Buried in the sand, buried alive. She glanced at Leonie, who appeared to have dropped off to sleep and was beginning to show a sunburn.

Despite the two glasses of wine, Kitty was wide awake. Leonie and Huib? No, it was impossible—yet all the signs were pointing in that direction. After Anna's party, she'd actually brought Leonie's name into the conversation, but Huib had quickly changed the subject—perhaps, now that she thought about it, a little *too* quickly. Or was she letting her imagination run away with her?

A hole in the sand. She allowed herself to fantasize Leonie stretched out in such a hole. She saw herself piling sand onto the lush bronzed body. The skimpy bikini bottom disappeared, the ripe breasts were covered over, those breasts Huib had—

In Kitty's imagination, Leonie at last understood that it wasn't just a game and tried to rise out of the grave, but it was too late for her to free herself from the weight of the sand. And Kitty kept shoveling more sand onto the pile, more and more. Leonie tried to scream, but a scoop of sand in her mouth made that impossible. No one was watching them. They were, after all, just fooling around. Having fun on the beach.

Kitty's own throat was suddenly dry. She wanted another glass of wine, but knew better than to give in to the temptation. The avoidance of temptation, that was the key. If you always stayed in control of your actions, you would always remain in control of your life.

Jeremy threw a ball, which hit Leonie's right shoulder. She awoke with a little scream and sat up straight.

"I was asleep," she said. "What an awful dream I had!" She looked at her body, ran a hand across her flat stomach. "I'm burning," she said. "Why didn't you wake me?" She sounded reproachful.

"Didn't think of it," Kitty said. For at least a week, he wouldn't be able to touch her. No, nonsense. Huib and Leonie? Ridiculous. She had to stop tormenting herself with these absurd suspicions.

"I have to pee," Leonie said. She got to her feet and set off toward the pavilion.

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Kitty watched her go, the sensual strut, the enticing sway of her hips.

Leonie's cell phone rang.

Kitty reached for her bag and found the phone. When she saw the number on the screen, her heart pounded in her chest like the waves on the sand. It wasn't until the third ring that she was able to answer it.

"Hello?" she said.

At the other end of the line, the connection was broken. She was absolutely positive: It had been Huib's office number on the screen. She dropped the phone back in Leonie's bag as if it had burned her fingers.

And then Leonie herself was back. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she said.

A ghost, yes, one ghost, but that was one too many. Kitty shook her head.

Leonie fished a towel from her bag, spread it carefully on the sand beside her chair, and lay on her stomach. "Will you do my back?"

Kitty tried to say something, but she couldn't form a coherent sentence. She kneeled beside Leonie, uncapped a bottle of sunscreen, and began to rub it in. Her mind swirled with unwanted images. Perhaps Huib had knelt beside her, just like this, his hands on her back, on her legs, between her thighs—no, no, no! She wanted to shriek, but forced herself to remain quiet.

They were together last night, she thought. There was no "meeting." They went out together, had a quiet little dinner, then back to her place, where they—

Leonie's back was so soft, so beautiful. Kitty rubbed the cream into her shoulder blades. The thoughtless brutality of inviting her to the beach today. The day after. Or perhaps it wasn't thoughtless, after all. Maybe it gave her an extra kick to adopt Kitty as a "friend," and this massage was Leonie's way of rubbing it in. Did she moan, just then, or was that the sound of the sea? Kitty watched her hands as they worked the lotion into Leonie's skin. Her nails were blood red and long, well cared for. Sharp. She envisioned herself digging her nails into Leonie's warm flesh with all the strength she could muster. Eight long stripes down Leonie's back, eight stripes which quickly welled with bright red blood.

To protect herself from losing control, Kitty jumped to her feet without a word and strode off down the sand. She saw nothing, heard nothing.

When she finally returned, Leonie suggested they go in for a swim. "A little break from this heat," she said.

They ran out into the water. Kitty dove into an oncoming breaker to wash the terrible thoughts out of her head. Leonie stumbled after her, was knocked off her feet by the wave.

Kitty swam out into deeper water, and Leonie followed her.

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Struggling for breath, she called out that she'd never really learned to swim.

The idea presented itself to Kitty as if a waiter had brought it to her on a serving dish.

She tapped Leonie's shoulder and asked, "Do you think Huib is handsome?"

Treading water clumsily, Leonie seemed surprised by the question. "Handsome? I suppose. Why?"

Kitty swam farther from shore with powerful strokes, then turned and watched Leonie dogpaddle towards her. This was her chance. There was no one within fifty yards of them. No one was paying the least attention to them. They were just two ordinary women enjoying a swim in the wonderfully cool sea.

When Leonie at last reached her, Kitty grabbed her by the shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Leonie demanded.

"Nothing," Kitty said. She stared deep into Leonie's eyes and tried to read fear in them.

Less than twenty feet away, a man's bald head broke the surface of the water. He saw them and looked embarrassed, as if he'd caught them in a secret embrace. "Afternoon, ladies," he said, with a note of irony in his voice, putting an odd emphasis on the word "ladies." He disappeared again beneath the surface.

Leonie paddled back to shore. Kitty stayed out a while longer, delaying as long as possible the moment when she would have to face Huib's mistress.

As she dried herself, she became aware that Leonie was staring at her.

"Why did you grab me like that?" she asked.

"I don't know."

Leonie examined her thoughtfully. "I guess that, sometimes, we all do things we don't understand."

"I suppose so." Kitty knew what Leonie was thinking. First the backrub, then the moment out in the water, now that strange look in her eyes.

Before they left the beach, they drank another glass of wine in the pavilion. Kitty was definitely tipsy when she slid behind the wheel of her Alfa Romeo. Another car had angled in so close beside her that there wasn't enough room to open the passenger door, so Leonie stood back and waited for her to pull out of the spot.

Kitty watched her rival standing there on those perfect legs. She had spread those legs for Huib, for her husband. The slut, the whore. And then she'd made nice-nice and asked the cuckolded wife out for a day at the beach, just to rub salt—no, *sand*—in the wound. She must be loving every second of this, the bitch.

Now, full throttle, right smack into her. She could crush the life out of her, smash her up against another car until every bone in

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her lovely body was broken.

Leonie winked at her.

She turned the key in the ignition. She could do it, right now—no one around to see except a couple a hundred feet away with their backs to her, loading bags and a cooler into the trunk of their car.

The motor caught. Leonie glanced apprehensively at the car, as if she didn't completely trust it. Kitty stepped on the clutch, shifted into first gear, eased off on the clutch, tapped the gas pedal.

The car shot forward—but then she stamped down hard on the brake, and the engine stalled.

No, she couldn't do it. She didn't dare.

Kitty drove in silence, her hands clamped tightly to the steering wheel. Leonie had no idea what was bothering her. Had something happened between her and her husband? Women who'd been married for fifteen years or more, who had kids to raise, whose husbands had well-paying jobs that kept them away from home a lot—sometimes they just went off the deep end. One would turn into a shopaholic, another would start taking ceramics classes, a third would suddenly convert herself to Buddhism. From what Wijnand had let slip about his Inge, Leonie had gradually built up a picture of the type. She'd seen it for herself at the tennis club, too. She'd even played against Inge a few times—of course, she'd let the older woman beat her. . . .

Kitty looked so *angry*. As if she had a score to settle with someone. Or was she just frustrated that her come-on out in the water hadn't been reciprocated? If that was really what she had in mind, she was seriously barking up the wrong tree—especially since Leonie had taken up with Wijnand. She wished she could confide in Kitty—about the affair, the passion—but Kitty would certainly spill the secret to Inge.

The car veered off the highway into a service plaza. "Gas," Kitty said abruptly.

"I'll run to the loo," Leonie said. She pulled her cell phone from her bag and headed over to the station. In a corner of the minimart, next to a pyramid of quarts of oil, she dialed Wijnand's private office number. There was no answer. She tried the other number he sometimes called from, and Wijnand picked up immediately, as if he'd been waiting for her to call.

"I'm in Huib's office," he said. "It's cooler in here than mine, and he's out of the building now, anyway. . . . No, I can't tonight, honey, I can't. . . . I'd love to, but I can't keep sticking Huib with all this extra work. The man needs time to have a home life."

"I understand," she said. "But I miss you terribly. At the beach today, I—"

"I tried to call you an hour or so ago," Wijnand said, "but someone else answered your phone."

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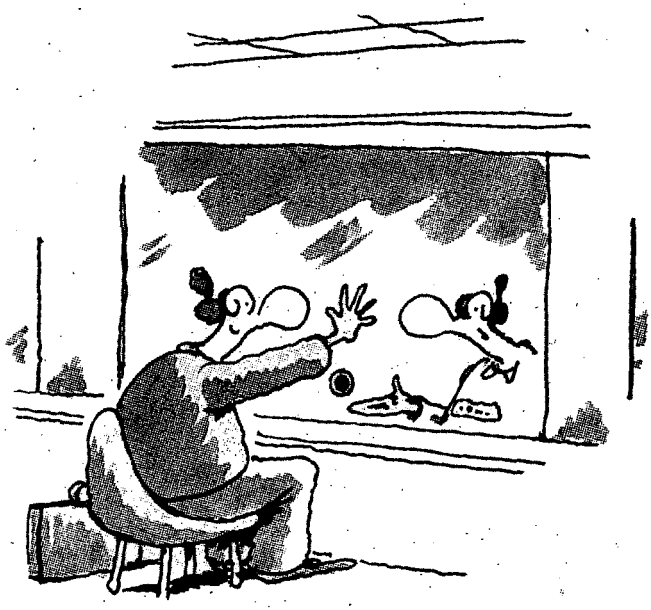
"Someone—? Who?"

"I don't know. All she said was hello. I could hear it wasn't you, so, just to be safe, I hung up."

Kitty returned the pump handle to its hook and glanced toward the station. She thought she could see Leonie inside. Frankly, my dear, she didn't give a damn. She didn't want the woman in her car, never again. She slid behind the wheel, started the engine, and took off, tires screaming on the asphalt. In the rearview mirror, she saw Leonie come through the door, a puzzled expression on her face. Perfect. She let out a cry of triumph and took one last look over her shoulder.

Leonie stepped outside, the cell phone still pressed to her ear. What was Kitty doing? She was roaring off in a hell of a hurry, leaving Leonie behind, as if exacting vengeance for some imagined insult. Her purse—with her wallet and credit cards—was in the car, she suddenly realized. How was she supposed to get back to Amsterdam?

She watched Kitty careen from the ramp onto the highway, not even slowing down to gauge the traffic. Its horn blaring, an enormous semi swerved to avoid her, but there wasn't nearly enough time for it to get out of her way. It slammed into the Alfa Romeo and flung it with a terrible crash into the guardrail, where the little car burst instantly into flames. ●



"No offense, but I don't do the hand thing with my lawyer."

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Fuzzy Wuzzy

by Dennis Richard Murphy

A newcomer to the field, Dennis Murphy has already had stories nominated for major awards in Canada and included in anthologies in the U.S. He has recently completed his first novel and is story-editing an international science-fiction series. In Murphy stories, murder is often committed by those who are desperately envious of their victims—society's winners.

Radical Ray loved Homeless Ramona better than crack cocaine. So when he found her faceup in the pond behind 1279 Briarthorn he cried real tears for the first time since Davy.

Briarthorn Crescent is the main artery of the upscale residential compound called "The Bundle," where people like Ray and The General are escorted out of the area minutes after Puerto Rican nannies call the cops on their cell phones. The closest the homeless get to The Bundle is the damp ravines that provide residents with leafy views through renovated kitchen windows and the street people with seasonal campsites below police radar. Out of sight, out of mind, as Gran would say.

A hundred years ago the valley was the pioneer parent to the mills and brickyards that spawn settlement. Now it cradles a swollen six-lane highway swaddled in sheets of greenery. Mere meters from the walleyes of stalled rush-hour drivers is a world invisible and unimaginable to them.

Radical Ray got his street name from The General, a crusty old-timer, king of the corners since the drug *du jour* was sweet white wine. When he said there should be more public toilets in the downtown core, The General dubbed him Radical Ray. The name had stuck, even though Ray couldn't recall its origin. Since Davy's death he'd learned to push the past out of his mind. The drugs helped. Some days he couldn't remember breakfast, but most days he hadn't had any to remember.

Ray met Homeless Ramona in the spring after that first hard winter, when the food bank was still in the old warehouse at the bottom of Taylor where it meets the lake. Thursday mornings are divvy day. If you show up on time and help divide up the weekly donations you get first pick of the food. Ray, The General, two grizzled guys from the subway grate above the Scully Street station,

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and Mrs. Pooney with her multicolored children were there early on that cold March morning. Their stained white breath mixed with the mint-sweet steam of volunteer ladies who'd spent the night in queen-size beds; pretty women, clean hair tied back with ironed ribbons, wearing bright silk scarves, puffy down coats with the labels on the outside, and new warm work socks with red wool edges. Pale lemon sun poured in from the unwashed clerestory windows high above and shafts of dust motes lit the small group in a sepia canvas of industrial workers before revolutions past or yet to come. Canned goods on one wooden pallet. Pasta on another. Canned goods. Pasta. Canned goods, pasta . . .

Homeless Ramona arrived late and didn't help. She stood erect beside her silver wire buggy surveying the process, arms pressed to her sides, hands stuffed in deep pockets. Ray felt ill that day, like most days. He watched her out of the crusty corner of one eye. Her giant green velour hat was pulled down to meet a scarf the color of toffee, so all he could see was a few wisps of pasta-colored hair and her eyes, shiny black olives that darted left and right, watching every move like an anxious chef with a new apprentice. Her cloth coat hung heavily to ankles clad in worn leather hiking boots, good ones with hooks instead of holes at the top so the laces could be easily tightened. The coat was once green or maybe gray, with large lapels and oversized cuffed sleeves, chic—even expensive—in its day.

When Ramona saw Ray pick up the box of chocolate-covered digestive biscuits she chirped, a soft but insistent cough, a barely audible "keh, keh." Volunteers and homeless looked up, puppets on a single string, to see her raised arm and extended index finger. She wore knitted gloves, the kind where you can pull the finger tips off to make change or pick up a cigarette butt, her imperial pointer poking from the wool like a sparrow's head from a Boy Scout birdhouse, angled slightly down at the precise degree her eyes looked down her nose. Ray felt compelled to look at the cookies in his hand, then up to her fixed stare. She nodded confirmation—a starling's short sharp dip of the head—and he walked toward her, hypnotized, to hand her the box. While the volunteers stood stunned in reverent recognition of real refinement, the homeless stole the opportunity to pack their pockets with the choice stuff—zip-top single servings of sweet caramel custard, a jumbo can of Mr. Gouda's Black Bean Soup, a foil pan of Jiffy Pop, a stale Snickers bar.

Somewhere inside that jumble of old clothes and attitude was a woman worth knowing, thought Ray. Head pounding and nose dripping, every joint aching from self-abuse, he shuffled to catch up with Ramona where the row of portable toilets guarded the back end of the loading bay.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said. He hadn't called anyone ma'am since Gran had insisted on it. Ramona stopped. Shorter by a foot, she still seemed to look down on him.

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"May I help you, young man?" She even sounded like Gran. Like the Queen Mother. With a . . . superiority, with some attitude born of somewhere Ray would never go.

"Them, uhm . . . them cookies you got there are, uhm, some damn . . . darn good cookies, ma'am." Ray hadn't thought out what he wanted to say. Ramona said nothing. "We had those same ones in the cupboard." No response. He started to sweat. Shiny black olives looked into his unwiped watery eyes and he had to look away before summoning the strength to look back. "The top cupboard, ma'am, higher 'n Davy 'n' me could reach. . . ." Back in Gander, back before Davy drowned, back before the troubles began.

"Do you take drugs, young man?" Ray went hot, as if his brain were blushing, as if his words were as visible as his breath, as if they could be examined, tested, disproved, until all secrets were revealed.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're stupid." She pronounced it "st-yew-pid."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So stop it. It's foolish. It's a fraud. And you needn't be."

She turned away, pulling her buggy past the toilets, pushing down hard on the heavy metal exit bar of the steel door, disappearing into the frenzied flurries of the morning. Ray watched after her, legs heavy like an old man's, heart soaring like a boy's heart, fat with feeling, embarrassed by acquaintance, shamed by the failure to appear mature.

"Yes, ma'am," he said to himself. A strong voice, unheard for a long time.

"Are you friggin' comin' or not?" The General yelled from the street end of the huge bay, voice reverberating into a muddy murmur like public-address apologies for delayed trains.

Everyone called him The General. No one knew his name. He wore round wire-framed glasses with a frosted left lens and won money betting people he could take his eye out. Ray had seen him hustle in bars, remove his wire frames with a flourish, spread his eye wide, stick a dirty finger in the corner, and pop out this white ceramic thing with a bright blue eyeball printed on it. With a "tole yah so" he'd slam it down hard on the round Formica tabletop where it swam in a puddle of spilled beer, a joke-store keychain fob staring wetly up at whoever had to dig for a lost Loonie.

He was a mean old man, thin as a piece of paper, skin dry as a snake's, and smooth as a salesman. He said friggin' this and friggin' that and never had a nice word for anyone. He wore his knitted scarf high all year round to hide mottled blue birthmarks on his right cheek. Those marks, along with his scarred red nose, false eyeball, frosted lens, and the nervous habit of moving his tongue quickly from one side of his toothless mouth to the other, gave credence to rumors of his being bravely gassed or proudly shell-shocked on a distant European beach in some far-off foreign war.

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"Was that the Korean War then, General?" Ray said.

"What do you know 'bout friggin' war?" said The General.

"Was it the Army you were in?" asked Danny D. one night.

"Army. Navy. Air Force. U. S. Marines. Don't friggin' matter a damn. It was a concerted friggin' effort. Friggin' teamwork, boy, not like you'd see today."

Last fall Radical Ray and The General had arrived at Danny D.'s camp between the tracks and the Sandhill Liquor Store within minutes of each other. Sick of the cold, Danny had gone south to live off a sister in Virginia. The General had entered through the hole in the chain-link fence by the piss-stinking liquor-store wall. Ray had scaled the Scully Street embankment and walked up the train tracks. It was a good camp, with two ways in and out if you had to leave in a hurry, and you could reach it all winter once the tracks were plowed. It was in a fold, so north winds went right overhead.

They decided to share it. The General had been city-smart for years and Ray was just in from the Maritimes. Even when stoned, Ray had the strength and flexibility of youth while The General was feeling joint pains even on the warm days. Ray's wary, wishy-washy uncertainty was offset by The General's terse military insistence on making all the decisions all the time. With the help of a couple of thick corrugated refrigerator boxes from behind The Future Shop and The General's favorite knife, they each had a shelter that their body heat could warm most nights. When Ray couldn't sleep, he'd recite Davy's poem over and over. It was a bad winter. People died. On more than one night they lay together in one box, sharing their heat to fight a cold that meant to kill them, The General's night drool freezing solid on Ray's wool mitt.

A month after he met Homeless Ramona at the food bank, Ray and The General ran into her near the big Dairy Queen on the far side of the valley. It was a fine, sharp-shadowed soft spring day with fat white clouds dabbed on a poster-paint sky and the warm promise of a good summer. Ramona wore a wispy light-blue dress and a small hat almost the same color, with a loose veil like a spider web draped over her face. Ray thought she looked pretty good. The General wouldn't look at her.

"And with which regiment did you say you served, General?" asked Ramona, back straight, long fingers interlaced on a black patent leather purse with the poise and posture of a Royal. Beautiful hands, thought Ray.

"It's not the friggin' regiment that matters, it's the friggin' man," said The General, staring at the ground.

"If you must use language like that I would prefer you didn't speak to me at all," said Ramona, and The General shut his mouth for the first time Ray could remember.

"Friggin' princess," he said after she'd departed. "Friggin' nose so friggin' high in the air she couldn't smell shit if it bit her."

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"She has a figure. That's for sure," said Ray, watching her walk away.

She was older than him, but only five or ten years at a guess. Maybe less. Her arms and legs looked firm. Her hands were perfect, long thin fingers and clean clear nails just the right length, filed, cared for. She wasn't easy to be friends with. If she thought he was even a little stoned she'd walk away. If she smelled booze she'd ignore him. He couldn't fool her. Most days she'd appear near the corner of Taylor and Scully, sipping a small sweet espresso in the sun outside the Koffee Korner where the drug deals went down, then wheel her buggy away. He'd catch up to walk in the same direction, beside her if the street wasn't too crowded. Sometimes she'd speak.

"Are you following me?"

"No, ma'am. Just walkin' a piece with you."

"Well, don't," said Ramona, and Ray would watch her turn up Portree or Moffat, pulling her buggy behind her, its loose wires ringing rhythmically as the hard rubber wheels hit the sidewalk cracks.

He had nothing to say to her. He stayed awake making up conversations, upsetting The General, who yelled from his box and called him a fool. The more Ray talked about her, the angrier The General became, for reasons Ray couldn't figure. He remembered when she'd lectured him about dope that time near the food bank toilets. Maybe that was the way to get her attention. It wouldn't be a walk in the park, that's for damned sure. Ray disappeared for six weeks. No one knew where he'd gone. Not Ramona. Not even The General, although he said he did when anyone asked. Ray came back after Labor Day looking younger, with some sun on his arms, freckles on his face, not so shifty when he looked you in the eye.

He waited across from the Koffee Korner, as pumped up as Davy got about cod jigging with his big brother. When Ray saw Ramona wheeling her buggy down Taylor, he ran after her and caught up a block south. She ignored him. He said nothing. When she looked sideways at him he was so afraid she was going to tell him to get lost he blurted out: "I'm off the dope . . . I don't do no—I don't take no drugs anymore. No crack, no smoke, no drinkin'—no nothin'. . . . Straight. . . . Honest." Breathless.

It made him feel good just to say it. And it made him feel better than he ever had when Ramona stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, looked right at him with those eyes, and said: "Good for you, Ray. Good for you." When she reached out and touched his bare forearm with her soft hand he thought he was going to faint. The last woman's touch he remembered was from Gran behind him at the funeral, hands on his shoulders, thumbs dug hard into his spine to make sure he listened when the priest rued Davy's short life.

"You look better, Ray. You have some color. Healthy color. You look well."

Her eyes were dark brown, not black. Chocolates, not olives. She

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had nice tiny lines at the corners of her eyes. With the sun behind her she had a soft blond down on her cheeks. They walked together silently for a block or two, until Ray let her go when they reached Moffat. She didn't ask him to leave but he wouldn't spoil the moment. She knew his name. She'd said his name. She'd touched his arm. With those hands of hers.

All through September they walked together, sometimes right to the edge of The Bundle where the parks had graveled paths and benches to sit on. Staying straight was about the hardest thing he'd ever done, harder than school, harder than cutting cod for the co-op, almost as hard as the memory of hanging on to Davy, feeling his small wet hand slip away. Each time Ray went past a newly parked car the smell of warm metal and oil made him think of smoldering crack on a plate of tinfoil and his mouth would water with want.

He told Ramona about his addiction, about Davy, about how nobody blamed him except maybe Gran and she never came right out and said so. About picking berries and playing ball, about trout fishing and hitching rides into town. About feeling better lost than found, unknown rather than known, about leaving home. One day he got up the nerve to tell her Davy's poem: "Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear. Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair." Ramona put her hand over his and said the last line with him: "Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?" Ray laughed. She knew Davy's poem, but she'd turned her head away, staring off across the park where young mothers with space-age strollers pushed their children on swings and told anxious pets they'd walk them soon.

"You okay?" he said. Ramona nodded.

"I'm fine, Ray. I'm okay." She wouldn't turn to look at him, just kept looking across the park. "It's a true poem, Davy's poem. It's what I like about you." She turned to look at his face. He felt they were both near tears but he didn't know why. "You're exactly who you are, Ray."

"Well, of course I am," said Ray. "Who else could I friggin' be? Sorry."

That night, sitting on logs around a fire, trading spoonfuls of his Campbell's spaghetti and wieners with The General's creamed corn, Ray shared his feelings.

"She's darn smart," said Ray. "Maybe too smart for me, but I think she likes me all right." The General waggled his tongue, his signal of discomfort, but said nothing.

"I mean, sometimes I look at her sideways and can't believe how lucky I am," said Ray. "I can't believe she even likes me at all." The old man mumbled, loudly, tongue speed increasing.

"I think about her all the time, y'know? Every minute of every day and all night long, it's like . . ." The General's muttering grew even louder. His tongue waggled faster and faster, cuing the explosion that blew Ray off his log.

"You friggin' stupid dumb friggin' Newfie," said The General.

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"Thick as a friggin' fish, you are. I'll show you what's what, you dumb shit. C'mon. C'mon." Ray followed the old man into the ravine, up a steep hill on a small rabbit path littered with Zig-Zag papers and chewing gum where the rich kids smoked dope after school. Leaves were falling, most pale yellow and already wet with evening dew. Ray kept slipping and The General kept swearing at him, telling him to hurry. He seemed drawn to somewhere, cursing and slashing the underbrush, angrier as he climbed. At the end of the path was a stone wall, almost obscured by scrub trees and ferns with frostbitten tips. In the wall was an ornamented iron gate. When The General pulled it open it squawked.

"Dumb shit. You'll see." He moved quietly through, flicking his hand at Ray to follow.

It was beautiful inside, instantly quiet, an overgrown Ali Baba garden with vines and trees and paths leading to carved stone benches in hidden nooks. Lichen-covered urns stood high on pedestals crammed with overgrown grasses spilling out like the hair of mad medieval hags. Knights must have walked here, thought Ray, plighting troths and kneeling on flagstones before ladies with pointed hats trimmed with see-through stuff like Gran's good curtains. Davy would have loved this.

The General hissed, peremptorily waving his skinny fingers, his good eye malevolent, knowing, commanding Ray to follow. Flagstones framed a rectangular pond crammed with faded yellow reeds; bright green algae floated on mucky and mysterious water.

The General stopped, tilting his head like a junkyard dog craving conflict. Grabbing Ray's sleeve, he pulled him past the pond to the rear of a large stone house. A Bundle house. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary—they shouldn't be here. Ancient metal furniture rusted on a patio. Thick green vines, leaves turning red at the tips, covered the rear of the house and would have obscured the small wooden door if not for a lighted bulb above it.

"We shouldn't be here," whispered Ray.

"Shut up and friggin' watch," said The General, pulling Ray behind the trees, impatiently clearing branches and leaves out of the way, ripping a thin branch from a juniper as if it were the arm of a man, exposing the white pith at the joint.

"We shouldn't—" The General slapped his palm over Ray's mouth and brought a filthy forefinger up to his lips. Ray heard the squeal of the gate, a rattle of hard wheels, and the shimmy of wires before he saw Homeless Ramona pulling her buggy past the pond and the rusted furniture, up to the back door. In the light of the bare bulb she used a key to let herself in. She was at home. Her home. In The Bundle. Homeless Ramona wasn't homeless, was she?

The General watched Ray, his good eye gloating, malignant, thin lips joined by a white gummy elastic substance at the corners of his mouth, tongue whipping madly from side to side and thin

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arms folded across his hollow chest as if he'd made his point. But what point, thought Ray? What was the point of all this?

"Friggin' phony," said The General, as if he'd heard the question. "Rich bitch phony. Laughin' at us. At you."

Ray didn't know what to think. He didn't sleep that night. He found Ramona sitting on the bench outside the Koffee Korner in the morning and splurged on a small double-double, the minimum cost of a seat. The bored teen behind the counter turned up her pierced nose and examined his coins as if they'd been reported stolen. He sat down beside Ramona, but before he could frame a question she invited him home.

The house interior was as neglected as the garden. Inside the back door they climbed a half set of stairs to a dim, musty kitchen and walked between cardboard boxes crammed with bottles and papers and coat hangers to what was probably the dining room with its high walls and decorations of baby angels holding banners of plaster cloth up near the ceiling. A one-wheeled buggy crammed with plastic shopping bags lurched in one corner. In another a cot was covered with a shiny red sleeping bag. On top was a tired teddy bear, smooth with age, shiny with handling.

Ramona was silent, stern-faced, busy, as she moved newspapers from a pitted chrome chair and motioned for Ray to sit down. She went into the kitchen, where he heard water running, and returned with an electric kettle she plugged into an overstuffed white extension cord. They sat in silence, listening to the kettle element groan, the water reaching a boil.

"What are you thinking, Ray?"

"Nothing, I guess. I mean, I knew this . . ." He waved his arm around as if to display the house. "But I don't know what I think about it . . ." His voice fell off, starved by confusion. "Or if there's anything to think about . . ." Ramona nodded her birdlike nod and poured the hot water into two cracked cups, one with a teabag. She stabbed at the bag with a spoon, angrily, thought Ray, beating out the flavor before she transferred it to the second cup and beat it again.

"I guess I just don't get it," said Ray. "The General says you're a phony. . . ."

"He does, does he?"

"That's what he says. He says you're rich and can buy anything and don't need to act like . . . like us . . ." Ray ran out of words again. He wanted a smoke, a shot, a hit, a toot. His neck and upper arms hurt like a heart attack. Ramona paused a moment, then walked to a bookshelf at the end of the small bed. She found a book with a dull red spine and removed a pressed newspaper clipping that she placed in front of Ray. She stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, thumbs on his spine, like Gran's at the funeral, except it felt good.

"Read that, Ray," she said. Ray felt himself go red.

"Can't read," he said. "Signs maybe. Not books or papers . . ."

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"Then look at the picture, Ray." The paper was yellow, like overbleached cloth. The high-contrast picture was of large, serious men in felt hats with brims, big suits, and wide ties, startled by a blast of flashbulbs, arms raised to protect their eyes. Except one. Helpless in the assault of reporters, arms pinned to his sides, a boy tucked his pointed chin into his thin chest in an impossible attempt to hide his face, a young man in a military uniform, prisoner of the men without smiles. He had a large bandage over one eye, bright as the high beam on a new car. The marks on his cheeks told Ray who he was.

"It's The General," he whispered, his throat suddenly dry, fumbling for his mug, sipping cold tea.

Ramona stopped rubbing his shoulders. She leaned forward and Ray was aware of her breath on his neck, the smell of her hair, the pillow of her breasts on his back. "Police last night captured James Edward Kelsey," she read, "a deserter wanted for theft of military property and the brutal murder of his senior officer." Ray felt winded. Slapped. Betrayed. By The General. By Ramona. By Gran. By life. He wanted to sleep. He wanted some dope. He wanted his little brother back. He wanted to go home.

"Kelsey was wounded by a bullet while being subdued. It is expected he will lose his left eye as well as his freedom when both a military trial for his Army crimes and a civil trial for the killing of Major Paul . . ." Ray grabbed the clipping from the table, pushing Ramona backward, ripping the article to shreds.

"I hate the secrets," he shouted. "I hate all the secrets." He slumped in the chair, spent. Ramona turned Ray's wet chin up to look at her and shook her head. Touched by his perfect simplicity, she brushed his hair back from where it stuck to his forehead.

Ray spent the day sleeping on Ramona's bed, exhausted by truth, drained by drama. When he woke up clutching the old bear to his chest, she'd gone. He called her name and peeked into the room at the front of the house where furniture was covered in once-white sheets. He felt out of place. A trespasser. Things had changed. He was alone again. He took the bear without thinking, as a souvenir of what might have been.

There was less than an hour of light left when Ray reached the camp. The General had a small fire going in the pit and sat on a log making unintelligible noises, hacking angrily at a thin stick with his sharp knife, slashing wood chips that sprayed in all directions. The firelight made his lined, stained face look satanic. It became redder and blacker when he saw the bear.

"Jesus, boy. Ain't you cute? Girlfriend give you a friggin' teddy bear? You stupid goddamned Newf." Ray stood and stared at the fire, at the empty rye bottle on the ground, holding the bear by one arm like Christopher Robin ready for bed. The General stood up, wobbling, stepping around the fire, stamping as if his legs were dead, slashing at the stick faster and faster, spraying chips onto

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Ray's sweater, sticking his face right into Ray's face. The booze and beans on his breath reeked like a toilet.

"When you gonna get it, boy?" His spittle hit Ray in the face. "She's phony as a three-dollar bill, you dumb shit."

"So are you." Ray heard himself say it. A small voice.

"What?" The General moved even closer, his lips almost touching Ray's. "Whaddya mean, you little shit? Whaddya saying, asshole?" He took a sudden step to one side and slashed his knife at the bear, opening a slit in the thin belly where white stuffing spilled out.

"I'm saying you're James Edward Kelsey," said Ray. "James Edward Kelsey," he yelled, louder, as The General held his arms up like he was being attacked by invisible hornets. "James-Edward-Kelsey, James-Edward-Kelsey," shouted Ray after him as the old man rattled through the chain-link fence. "Private James Edward Kelsey, you . . . you . . . you friggin' phony," he shouted into the dark as the old man's footsteps rang across the liquor-store parking lot.

It was cold outside Koffee Korner the next morning. Ramona wasn't there. Probably breakfasting in The Bundle. The General had disappeared, too, but Ray didn't look very hard for him. He made four dollars holding out an empty paper coffee cup outside the McDonald's on Portree and treated himself to a bacon and egg McGriddle before the breakfast menu shut down at ten-thirty. The rain started about noon, then the wind came up and he bet there'd be wet snow before dark. He stared at the sky for a long while. Winter was coming. When he lowered his head he'd decided something. He went back to the camp.

The General wasn't there. Ray picked up the torn bear where it had fallen beside the fire pit, brushed the wood chips off its skewed face, poked at the stuffing, and crammed it in his pocket. This was no time to run away.

It took him a couple of tries before he found the gate. He opened it slowly, almost silently. He crept past the hag-haired urns and the blue-berried junipers that smelled like gin, pinching the bear's stomach to keep the stuffing in. The falling wet snow muffled sound like a scarf. He walked toward the house, rehearsing his lines, wondering if she could see him from a window. If she was watching. She wasn't. She was floating in the pond, faceup, dead brown eyes staring at a slate sky, beautiful hands bloody with torn nails floating on black water, thin ice forming like gray webs between her sliced fingers. Ray's tears ran hot on his cold cheeks as he watched fat flakes land on her face and stay there.

Through the blur of his tears, as if through someone else's glasses, Ray saw something white between flagstones. He picked up the bloodied glass eye and hefted it, weighing his options. As the snow obscured Ramona's face Ray pulled the old bear from his pocket and tossed it into the pond with her, then paused, bowed as if in prayer, and threw the glass eye after it. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SWAMPED

by L. Leigh

I was drying glasses and wishing a new CD would drop in the dance-floor jukebox when the door slammed open, hot daylight searing through the gloom. For a moment, everything went silent, even the music, as we all took in the figure with the sun at his back. I couldn't make features out, except a broad-brim hat and what looked like a . . . cape. No, not a cape exactly, but a long open poncho of some kind, hand-cured leather and canvas in a camouflage pattern.

The pseudonymous L. Leigh has been writing nonfiction since the age of 15. His articles on animals, technology, and nutrition have appeared in newspapers and in sailing, nature, and technology magazines. His knowledge of one of the animals in this story is firsthand. He introduced an alligator to his family's living room, where it lived for 25 years, sunning itself in the window. ¶

It took another moment or two to realize that he moved on handmade crutches, which I supposed explained why he shoved the door open so hard. A few giggles sprang up from the handful of biker wannabes we had been getting recently.

I was fascinated by his leggings. They appeared to be crudely hand-stitched out of alligator belly skin. His one good foot, judging from what I could see of the leather curving up from the heel and toe, appeared soled with hide from the back of a gator. I couldn't think of anything much tougher or thicker than the ridged tire-tread skin of an alligator back.

He pistoned over to the bar, hoisted a hip onto a stool, and set a wrinkled brown paper bag on the counter near his crutches. Everything about him looked older than old, weathered though not withered. I gathered my breath, a defensive habit I had developed from years of dealing with street bums and their body stench.

But the man had no bad odor; he simply smelled as he looked, of

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saddle oil and outdoors. His leather hat and handmade poncho appeared utterly impractical in South Florida until I realized it was perfect for an outdoor man unused to air conditioning. I couldn't see his eyes, just his lower face, also seemingly made of rawhide. Even his voice was leathery and husky as he asked for a glass of wine.

One of the trikers behind him guffawed.

"Red or white?" I asked.

Another snigger. "Wine's a wuss drink," said a junior biker.

"Red. Dry."

I set a glass on the counter and got out my best jug of Ernest & Julio. "Sorry about the cheerleaders," I said.

"Wine's a real pussy drink," repeated one of them, coming over to his elbow. The man touched his fingertips to the base for a few moments, then turned his hand over and cupped the glass with the stem slid between his fingers. I noticed that his wrists were scarred with deep gouges, looking more like gnarled cypress than human flesh.

"Christ, boys, look how a pussy drinks."

I was fishing for a defusing repartee, something cool and witty like, "Gee, you dudes wouldn't know pussy if it bit you," when the wannabe made the mistake of touching the man.

The room dropped deathly still.

Uh-oh.

Swiveling his head precisely and slowly, like a gun turret, the stranger locked his stare onto the biker kid. Once he was caught in the man's sights, the wannabe froze. It must have been a trick of the neon or something, but under the hat brim the stranger's eyes *emanated light,* glinting like the naked steel of sword points.

Jesus, *holy mother of God.*

For a moment, all of us in that frozen stillness of the taproom, every single one of us—stunned into silence—envisioned the outdoor man's arm arcing like lightning, striking like a copperhead in an unretractable moment of horror. Slashing the wineglass across the eyes and nose of the biker, splintering slivers of glass and bone and flesh . . .

I shivered, pushing the image away.

"Jesus." The wannabe blanched, backing away, palms held out in a placating, push-away motion. "No harm meant, man. I mean, chill, dude, peace. We're cool, right? Okay?"

The man at the bar just as slowly rotated his head back. He took a sip and said, "You were going to help . . . thanks."

"'S nothing." I shrugged and let out a breath I forgot I had been holding.

He studied the wall behind the bar as the wannabes scrambled to pay up. I keep my plaques and awards mounted back there. I closed my register and turned back to him.

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"You were a cop?" he said.

"Once."

We didn't move for a while in that companionable way quiet men have as they gauge respect for the other. Nearby, motors, neon transformers, and occasionally compressors cycled on and off.

"Why did you quit?"

I swatted a fly with my towel. "Long story."

His saddle-grain lips parted in what might have passed for a smile. "I got time."

Usually it's the barflies do the talking and I simulate listening. I poured a tumbler of wine for myself, and tipped the last of the Gallo into his glass.

Finally, I said, "Politics, maybe. Futility, definitely. Absurdity."

"Absurdity?"

I sighed. "For sure. I reckon the turning point came with a crazy old judge a few years back. Old Judge Everhart, if you remember him. The madman that was always in the newspapers citing folks left and right for contempt?"

He nodded. "I met him a long time ago."

"Crazy, egotistical fool. A real nutcase. They used to call him Judge Ever-fart when he wasn't listening. Let his position go to his head. He'd get mad at someone in a restaurant, the old bastard would cite them for contempt. Once, he jailed a cop who'd pulled him over on a DUI. Guy was an arrogant sucker, or probably senile. Nobody seemed to want to deal with him, or the situation. Judges are always protecting their club, afraid they might get axed next if someone learns they aren't infallible.

"It was 'cause of him we lost two prisoners in my custody and almost lost two cops, one my boss, one of them my best friend."

"How's that?"

"I don't know if you recall that long ago, but that old bastard judge had a juror stand up to him once. It was all over the news for weeks. It was a case where Everhart ignored the jury's recommendation on a simple manslaughter that should have been at the most second-degree. The damned judge thought he was Roy Bean or something and told off the jury, shouted at them that the case was obviously felony murder and he was eyeing the death penalty. Probably would have been readily reversed as so many of his cases were back then, but it wasn't justice, and only a fool would trust Florida to back off a death-penalty case, not when we got governors competing against each other to see who can off the most on death row.

"I wasn't in on it at the beginning, but I had heard it floating around the offices after the judge tongue-lashed the jury. The jury foreman, a professor, they said, a history professor, I think, or . . . No, I remember: It was anthropology or archaeology, that Indiana Jones stuff, but local, you know. I'm trying to remember. . . . Any-

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way, he stood up and spoke his mind to the judge about ignoring the facts, the law, and the will of the jury, and abusing his authority.

"Whew. We were all delighted someone tweaked the judge's nose, but the jerk-ass cited the poor putz for contempt. I reckon tempers flared. They say the juror was still arguing when the bailiff came up to take his arm. And the old judge went ballistic and cited the man for resisting arrest and assaulting a court officer, which even the bailiff wouldn't testify had happened. But that damned judge was going to make his point. He slammed that juror in jail for something like a total of sixty-seven days or so, if I recall. Probably still be there if he hadn't gotten himself killed.

"Every few hours, the judge would haul the prisoner out and demand an apology that the man refused to make. Some folks started comparing the vindictiveness versus stubbornness to the Susan McDougal case, you remember, that woman in the Whitewater scandal who kept telling Ken Starr what he didn't want to hear, that the Clintons didn't do anything wrong except lose themselves a bunch of money. You got to respect someone with guts like that.

"That's when everything degenerated into a media circus. The news focuses on personalities, you know, and that's what they did at the time. The newspapers described the professor as this intense Harrison Ford type, unconventional, principled. I remember hearing how he ran in five- and ten-K charity events and marathons. The professor was popular, taught this supposedly great course on Living History, did field trips, digs, campouts, this-is-how-our-ancestors-lived stuff. Used to be a campus poster, *'Before football, before gambling, the Seminoles got game. . . .'* His students loved him, and they started protesting, stickers and posters everywhere saying *Have a Heart, Everhart* and *Free the Prof, Jail the Judge.* Man, it got that old magistrate really pissed."

I rested my palms on the bar, rolled my shoulders to ease my stiff neck, and thought back. I had never before had a man die on my watch. Vowed I never would again.

I started to unwind the story as the stranger slowly sipped his wine. . . .

My first day back from vacation up north had started out slow. Slow tends to change real quick, though, and sure enough, midmorning we got radioed with a transport escape, a handful of prisoners on a bus. Dispatch routed us to a tourist camp just above 41 in that swamp between Okeechobee and the 'Glades, that wasteland some people for reasons both good and bad call the kidneys of Dade County. Tourists, they come in here asking where Lake Okeechobee is, I like to make a pun, tell 'em it's easy to spot on a map: It looks like a hole punched in lower Florida for a key chain.

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The camp was typical: a few dozen RV sites, a coffee shop, a souvenir store, three or four docile alligators that the owner's son-in-law "rassles" every couple of hours. When we got there, three airboats were tied up at the end of a dock, with a couple of crackers grunting and cussing over the engines. From there, the swamp stretched for miles and miles, just bogs and grasses and forests with the roots of just about everything under water.

Everybody there was super worked-up. My partner Chuck and I headed directly down to the pier. One of the men looked up. "This here 'un be refueled in a minute. The bastards took the magneto leads from the others. You can still catch the weirdo in the canoe."

"The weirdo?"

"The guy that wrote a check on a napkin and then took a canoe instead of an airboat."

"What are you talking about?" My partner bit off each word as former Northerners do.

With exaggerated patience toward a Yankee, the man explained. "This van pulls in, three Cubans get out waving guns, then run into the gift shop. Then this here pale, lean white guy gets out, blinking like he ain't certain what to do, and then he drifts into the gift shop, too. I'd say he was skinny, but it's more like those ropey muscles bike racers got.

"Them Marielitos make everyone lie on the floor, taking cartons of cigarettes, booze, candy, and all, but the white guy picks out a Swiss Army knife, matches and a lighter, a Dolphins cap, plastic trash bags, a toothbrush, lots of salt packets, and the cheapest watch we got."

"Cheapest?"

"Yeah. Just a wind-up Mickey Mouse, a watch with hands. Asked for it specific; said he didn't want no battery watch. And a salt shaker, of all things."

"What then?"

"The Cubans yell at him to hurry, but he waves them on. While they was down startin' an airboat and disablin' the others, the crazy white guy asks Myrtle to ring up his stuff. He takes a napkin and writes it out like it's a check: name, bank, everything. You ever hear anything so stupid?"

"Stupid, maybe, but legal," I said.

"What you mean, legal?"

"You can cash it, if he's got money in the bank. If he goes to that trouble, I'd say he probably does. Then what?"

"No kiddin'? You sure? I never heard nothing like that."

"What then?"

"The white guy says, 'How much to buy one of them canoes?'

"The cashier looks at him like he's crazy till the one Cuban stickin' behind yanks a gun in her face and says, 'De man axed you how much a canoe?'

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"Myrtle says three hundred, maybe, and the guy adds that on the napkin and runs the hell outside after the Cubans.

"Anyway, they rushes down to the dock, and the other Marielitos are gettin' ready to shoot up the airboats they're not takin'. This guy tells 'em, no, people run this place need to make a living. He says all they got to do is take the magneto wires. Dude tells 'em go ahead and leave without him, he wants the canoe."

"Just a canoe?"

"Yeah, just a canoe, fiberglass, green. We use it around the camp here. He gets barely a hundert yards off the dock, 'fore their airboat blows out of sight. You could still see him in the channel just 'fore you showed up."

I looked out across the channel cut by the government through the thousands of acres of morass, a swamp bigger than some countries. If we were going to find an airboat and a weirdo in a canoe, we'd better get a move on.

My partner nudged me. "Uh-oh, look who's pulling up."

We both turned and watched an arriving H2 Hummer, and simultaneously groaned, "Oh crap."

Our police lieutenant stepped down, clad in the latest L.L. Bean. Like the reincarnation of the Great White Hunter with a Rolex. Probably had four, maybe five hundred dollars of gadgets in his fancy safari-vest pockets. He let a couple of hounds out of the back and grabbed a rifle.

"Snap to it, boys; I've got a fund-raising dinner tonight."

Chuck fired up the only working airboat, and I radioed for a chopper or a spotter plane to assist.

We were getting ready to cast off, when the lieutenant took over and announced he was going to pilot the thing. Chuck and I rolled our eyes at each other, and sure enough, Dale Earnhardt took off like he was in NASCAR, wiping out a couple of moor hens first thing. We figured by the time he was done, we'd maybe paint a handful of coots and an egret on the hull, too. The only lucky part was that he ran down the Cubans—literally.

We were flying down one of the corridors cut through the marshes when he whipped into an intersecting channel, showing off, and we just piled on top of them before we could stop. They'd run out of gas—didn't know they'd grabbed a boat that needed fueling. They were dead in the water.

The lieutenant was furious, swearing at the Cubans, at us, at the dogs, blaming everybody but himself for wrecking the boats. Worst thing was, the radio broke in the smash.

We disentangled the twisted metal and spent a hot hour and a half trying to cobble together enough parts to get one airboat started. The lieutenant was already styling his story to show how these desperate *Marielitos* had tried to run *him* down. He didn't want two airboats coming out of his budget.

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We could have limped back if anyone had bothered to note which direction we'd come from. But with the sun straight up, we had no way to tell which way was which. All we could see was miles of swamp grass, mangrove and cypress forests, and an unlikelihood that any ground we might find was above water and solid. And man, those mosquitoes sucked. How did those Indians stand them? Still, we knew we'd come from the east, and which way that was would become apparent in the afternoon as the sun moved across.

"Damn," I remember saying to Chuck. "I go on vacation for two weeks and all hell breaks loose. What the hell brought this on?"

"It was old Judge Everhart again," said Chuck quietly. "He's still having fits about that stubborn FSU instructor. You remember, the archaeology guy in those wilderness-retreat ads; the ones that say, *'Spend your vacation with the Seminoles, no reservations required.'*"

"How could I forget?"

"It's been coming to a head; it made the papers on Sunday and the crap hit the fan. The *Herald* carried a sidebar explaining that the professor's plans to train for the marathon were on hold. Admirers were saying he was being unfairly dealt with. The students' protests were growing, and many had already signed up for his field courses. That worked up a lot of sympathy.

"It didn't help that the damn judge was dragging the professor in for an apology every couple of days, even ordered him dumped into solitary from time to time. Radio stations were saying the man was being punished for simply telling the truth.

"The judge told a reporter he was damned right it was punitive, that even jurors had to learn a lesson and the guy would rot in jail until he begged the judge to let him out. I got to give that prof credit, he was one defiant son of a bitch; never gave an inch."

"So what the hell has that got to do with this?"

"'Bout two days after you left for vacation, this professor guy intervenes in a jailhouse rape, saves some black kid from the old bed-sheet-and-soap trick, and one of the perps gets himself stabbed. Guards shove everybody into lockdown, and the next day the judge starts making noises that instead of the professor being a hero, he mighta caused the stabbing, fomenting riots and all, suggesting maybe he even caused the stabbing himself to create attention. It was all bull, but the judge tells the D.A. he wants an investigation, like he wouldn't anyway. But get this—" His voice dropped to a whisper that I had to strain to hear. "He calls the D.A. *and* our idiot lieutenant in, directs them to focus on the professor. Says he doesn't want to hear it was somebody else."

Chuck didn't smoke much, but he was thumbing his cigarette lighter. Sweat beads hovered right at the hair tips of his crew cut. "Right after that, *Inside Affair* runs a segment about the professor, and the judge gets real upset 'cause a *60 Minutes* producer starts

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calling around. Judge Everhart orders the professor humped to a different jail location every day so he can't be found and interviewed."

I could tell my buddy Chuck was disgusted. Cops and prosecutors do that, move a prisoner from jail to jail when they don't want them found. He wiped sweat out of his eyes and continued.

"During the transfer this morning, the transport driver gets bored with the whole affair, or maybe it's just that he was engaging in his own affair, bagging a little cutsie along the way. Who knew he had a habit of stopping at a coffee shop to see a girlfriend? That's how we ended up here. The driver got a wee bit careless with the Cubans."

"Terrific." I swatted mosquitoes on my arm.

So Chuck and I sat in that damn hot muggy swamp, watching the birds: ibises, blue and green herons, shovelers, and spoonbills. The unhappy Cubans found it funny when an anhinga, one of those "snake birds," surfaced next to the lieutenant, damn near giving him a heart attack.

It was one of the Cubans who finally got the engine started again; he was better in a pinch than our own shop mechanic would have been. Made sense, though; the boy had got busted for hotwiring cars. I hear in Havana they've got whole fleets of 1950s Detroit models they somehow keep running.

We sputtered vaguely in the direction we thought we'd come from and within minutes, the lieutenant pointed. "Look, there's our spotter plane." He heeled the boat and headed where the plane was circling.

That half-land, half-water environment can be indescribably queasy-making, working your inner ear overtime. When you're boating in open water, you know your world is liquid and that's that, but this was like another planet. When you float among rushes and cypress boles, you have an illusion of land. It looks like there's real ground there but most of the time there isn't. Your brain is at odds with itself because you can see grasses and weeds, and you can't see the water unless you look right straight down. Solid ground can be right next to you or only a foot or two below your boat, or it can be miles away in any direction. It can make you dizzy as hell if you let it.

We swept into an open area, free of grasses and weeds, wondering where the plane had got to. A handful of packages floated in the water, and several more, plastic-wrapped, floated farther on.

Chuck hooked one and dragged it against the gunwale. Plastic over burlap cover, tied with binder twine. He peeled away a corner to reveal sealed plastic over a white caked compound.

"Crap," said Chuck. "Cocaine. Let's get the hell out of here. That was no spotter plane."

With a crippled boat and three prisoners, we weren't in a posi-

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tion to take on drug runners. Because of that detour, though, we came across the canoe. In his hurry to scuttle our butts out of there, the lieutenant was crashing through walls of tall grasses, and repeated his new crash-test-dummy talent by nearly running over the professor, who was silently slicing through the weeds.

We lost a couple of minutes picking up one of the Cubans who had remained unconvinced of the lieutenant's lack of driving ability and stupidly failed to grab on to his seat. And when we spotted the professor again, he was slipping through stands of mangrove saplings our airboat couldn't penetrate.

The lieutenant shouted for him to halt, and fired off a few rounds, scaring those chicken-like gallinules, but not the professor. The man just melted into the shadows under the Spanish moss, disappeared among the trees.

We chugged around the shoreline for an hour until we realized we were circling an island. Since it had nothing resembling a beach, and the visible ground looked iffy, we put in at a colony of hillocks where the cattails ended and sand had built up.

The lieutenant instructed one of the Cubans to step ashore and tie the painter to a dead tree trunk. While the rest of us struggled off the boat, the man started to climb one of the belly-high hillocks. His first footfall collapsed to powder. Surprised, he tried again. Chuck said later he looked like a grinning kid trying to flatten a snowdrift.

When I looked up, the boy was pounding the soil flat, and took a high-legged step far up the side of the hillock until he was up to his waist, laughing.

"Oh God," I said. "Get him out of there."

It was too late. The man went down with a cry, like someone had tackled him. The worst part was, we could see what was going to happen to him. Within seconds, his face collapsed in pain, and then went from pain to terror before it was covered in crawling black. Chuck threw him a line, but he flailed his arms in such agony, he could hardly catch it.

I yelled at the Cubans still on the boat to dig out the ASK from the medic's kit. The lieutenant stood by with his rifle ready, not yet understanding what was happening.

"Don't touch him," Chuck yelled as the Cuban groped toward us. "Get into the water and strip," he told the man. "Quickly, get your clothes off, now, man, *rápidamente.*"

The poor fellow sank to his knees and fumbled with the jail-suit drawstrings. Black masses pulsed over his face and torso, literally burning holes in his body. It was going to take more than an anaphylactic-shock kit to help him.

Chuck sponged him down and forced him to swallow antihistamines as I popped open an epinephrine injector. The man started vomiting before I got him jabbed in the hip. We spread cortisone

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ointment over him, even as the skin bulged and blistered across his face.

"Jesus," said the lieutenant. "Don't they have fire ants in Cuba?"

"*Florida* didn't used to have fire ants, not these kinds of ants," I said. "They came in by ship from South America. Man, I've heard about mounds this huge but never seen anything like it before."

"Come on, Angelo," whispered one of his friends.

The Cuban started shivering uncontrollably, gasping for air. We could see hundreds of bites on his chest, possibly a few thousand overall, until hives covered him completely, puffing his lower eyelids closed.

I popped another injector, but it was too late; he died before I could plunge it in his arm.

We backed away, each of us grappling with what had just happened. I focused on Chuck, who had been my partner for years. Well over six foot, with a blond crew cut, he looks like your worst Marine tough-guy nightmare. Sometimes, though, when I look at him just right, I see what his wife must see, a glimpse of the little boy he once was. Right then, I saw a sickened, scared-silly brave little kid. We hadn't known the Cuban very long. He was still a *niño,* no doubt guilty of something, but undeservedly dead for nothing more than stepping on the wrong patch of soil. When I looked up, Chuck was on his knees alongside the Cubans, hands folded, lips moving in prayer along with Angelo's pals.

That was our lesson: *We were no longer in civilization.* We had naively waded into a primeval world with laws just as alien as its terrain.

We fell silent. A herd of those Jurassic Park brachiosaurs could have waded by, completely at home. We were the ones who were out of place.

The lieutenant looked away from us. "Let's get a move on."

Thinking we were leaving, Chuck and I started to heave the body onto the craft.

"No," said the lieutenant. "That bastard's still out there, and I want him."

Chuck rubbed his eyes with his oversized paw. "That professor? Look, the fellow was in jail for telling a mad-ass judge to shove it up his robes. Everything else is trumped up. This guy was just a juror, for Christ's sake, in a personality conflict with a crazy judge."

"Doesn't matter," said the lieutenant coolly. "Consider: A death that results from a felony—such as an escape—is itself a felony, even punishable as a capital offense." He beamed at us as if he'd just recovered some small victory out of this mess. "Felony-murder rule. And you know that judge wants him anyway. Everhart will lock him away forever. Cuff the Cubans and let's go."

"Get some perspective," mumbled Chuck, but we formed up,

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expecting to go together on the hunt. Of course, the lieutenant had other ideas.

"Go left, Chuck. You," he pointed to me, "go straight ahead, and I'll go this way," jerking his thumb at the flat stretch to his right. "Chuck and I'll take the dogs; maybe we can pick up a scent around the perimeter."

"Lieutenant, we shouldn't separate . . ."

"Just get going."

I eased past the ant mounds into the heavy afternoon sun, feeling the ground trembling like gelatin beneath my footsteps. I realized I was not walking on soil at all, but a hummock of decayed vegetation, a floating mass of prehistoric peat moss. I wondered how many visitors had wandered this way since the Seminoles had taken sanctuary here in the last century.

Within yards, the way became marshy, and I slogged to higher ground, filling my shoes with mud. What a stinking mess. I wondered how the professor could make it on foot in his thin prison slippers.

The insects were maddening, the murderous half-inch-long mosquitoes being the least of them. My eyes and nostrils felt as if they were filling shut, and I discovered I was walking in a cloud of no-see-ums, the Florida cracker label for an insect too tiny to see but that clots your eyes and nostrils with its sheer numbers. Florida's got sixty-eight varieties of mosquitoes, you know, and every single one sampled me. Plus there were black flies, horse-flies, sweat bees, and little yellow jackets; if this was their first taste of human flesh, they found it remarkably good.

A muskrat ambled across my path, startling me, but I tell you it earned my gratitude a moment later when I spotted the sinuous red and yellow bands casually threading after him. I held my breath as I dredged up the rhyme about coral and king snakes: *Red to black, friend of Jack. Red to yellow, kill a fellow.* That, in a package hardly bigger than a foot-long hot dog, held North America's deadliest venom.

I trod a lot more carefully after that, thinking about black bears and panthers, water moccasins, and all the other carnivores still calling the swamp home. It was when I stopped to get my bearings that I heard a distant scream, then baying. Chuck?

I beat my way back toward shore, wishing I had a machete. I thanked God for the hound's whining, or I would not have had a chance of locating them. And then the hound fell silent.

"Chuck! Chuck!" I shouted.

No response. I stumbled on.

It must have taken close to a half-hour, but I found Chuck and the bloodhound flat on the ground. Four or five sticks were planted in the mud, smoldering smoke. One of Chuck's pants legs was cut off at the knee, and tied around his calf. I thought he was

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unconscious, but he stirred when I knelt down beside him.

"What happened, buddy?"

"It was a moccasin, huge sucker."

"You're okay. You did a great job dressing the wound."

"I didn't dress it. It's our damned professor. Forced me down on my face, tied a tourniquet on me, cut the punctures open, sucked out the venom. Said water snakes are aggressively nasty."

"No shit." I shook my head. "Why're you just lying here?"

"He told me not to exert, and I'm dizzy as hell."

I glanced about me. "What's with the incense?"

"The professor, he broke off cattails and lit them. Said it keeps mosquitoes away. The bastard apologized that he didn't have time to set me up with a mangrove smudge pot."

For the first time since we had arrived, I realized we weren't plagued by bugs. The professor had something there.

I unwrapped the dressing. Chuck's skin was bruised and badly mottled with twin punctures in the fleshiest part of his calf, but it was not turning black. Between the two punctures was a surgically precise slit. He also had a number of odd marks on his legs, shaped like little flowers.

"Those are from those damn leeches that got on me. The prof, he takes out a salt packet and salts them. Suckers let right loose. Said I could do the same thing with a lit match, but not to pull them straight off or they'll infect."

"He's a regular Mark Trail guide."

"You can tell he's a damn professor; he can't stop lecturing. Probably what pissed the judge off, being lectured by a juror smarter than him. Help me up. Get me back before the boss dreams up some new disaster. He's as crazy as that judge."

"Which way do we go?"

Chuck pointed to an arrow drawn in the mud. "Professor again. He looks at his watch in the sunlight, turns a little, and says, 'That way.' Calculated the direction using his watch."

"How the hell could he do that?"

I helped Chuck to his feet. He pointed to a strange tall tree in the distance. "Don't know; he just did. Clocking the sun or something, I figure, or making a sundial. Look at that weird tall tree. He said something else about finding our way; said Indians planted those long ago in a perfectly straight line running up through the state. The Seminoles roamed through Florida, keeping them in sight like interstate markers."

The lieutenant was pacing when we got back. "Where the hell have you two been?" he said nastily, not waiting for an answer.

The Cubans were hunched in misery, tortured by clouds of insects and unable to move much since they'd been chained to the propeller shroud.

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I helped Chuck onboard and waited for the lieutenant.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said. "We've got a couple of daylight hours and a fugitive to catch. I want the bastard."

"Jesus," said Chuck to me. "He'll kill another of us yet."

I broke off a handful of cattail stalks and left them with Chuck and the Cubans. The lieutenant snapped the leash on the remaining dog, and I shouldered the medic kit. I was learning.

We tramped back over the path in silence, the late afternoon sun in our eyes. Past where I had found Chuck, the terrain opened unevenly. Two-foot-high mounds of dried mud and sticks dotted the flats. Not fire ants, I noted gratefully. Twice, I spotted turtle eggs where the lieutenant's boots had kicked clods loose. Sidling against our legs, the hound whined nervously. The lieutenant handed me the leash and unslung his rifle, pointing to shoe prints weaving among the mounds.

He stepped off, swinging his gun in an arc, like in a World War II movie. I tugged on the leash and the dog unwillingly followed, dragging back on me. We all sensed something—

A stick snapped like a gunshot.

With a growl, the hound leaped up on a mound, ears flattened, snarling into the forest shadows off to our right. The scene felt even more reminiscent of *Jurassic Park*. If you let it, it was all too easy to imagine a million years had slipped away—too easy to envision an ancient reptile in the fringe of trees.

The lieutenant pivoted and cocked his rifle.

And then we heard the hiss from hell, a loud sound like an old-fashioned boiler steaming, a hiss so primal, so feral, that the hair on the back of my neck prickled straight up on end. Our eyes strained for movement, but when it came, nothing could have prepared us for it.

Camouflaged, it came up off the ground a few yards in front of us and charged. Videos show them shuffling ponderously, bellies dragging the ground, elbow-like knees bent like badly manipulated puppets. This monster, though, had not bothered watching *Animal Kingdom*. It ran high off the ground, legs straight, and it charged, rushing, all teeth and armored scales. The lieutenant screamed and tumbled backwards, scuttling away. I might have done the same, but the leash was still wound around my wrist.

The gator opened its jaws, and oddly I noticed the interior of its mouth was a soft delicate pink, almost pretty. Noticed for only a second. The jaws clamped shut around the hound, and simultaneously, the monster lashed the lieutenant with her tail, bowling him yards out of the way.

The mound the hound had occupied crumbled, and the gator collapsed on top of it, jerking the leash and of course me flat on my face.

We lay like that forever, me just two feet from one of the world's

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remaining dinosaurs, maybe a fifth of a ton and the length and breadth of a fifteen-foot canoe. I was looking into the biggest eye I had ever seen, yellow, and slit like a cat's. As the minutes ticked by, one every week or so, I noticed that the lid blinked upwards like a bird's, and after a while I saw that it also had a transparent eyelid. I had lain beside my wife—my *ex-wife*—for years and hadn't noticed that much detail.

Insects buzzed around us, and sweat ran in rivulets from my scalp to the backs of my knees. Every now and then, the dog's body gave a dying spasm, and the beast's jaws closed a little tighter in response, crushing the last stubborn sparks of life. I could actually hear the bones snap. I noticed that the alligator had some kind of gland under the corner of its jaw, and offhandedly I wondered if I would live long enough to learn what it was for.

I had no idea where the lieutenant was; he sure hadn't stuck around to defend me. I was thinking Chuck should just have taken the Cubans and gotten out of this hellhole.

The alligator croaked, just like a frog, a several-hundred-pound frog. It croaked again, whether in contentment or triumph. Maybe it had taken its dinosaur brain that long to figure out it was still queen of the hill.

Without seeming to move anything, the beast started sliding toward the water. As it slid off the collapsed mound, I saw eggs inside. Ah, mama gator. What else could we have done wrong?

The gator continued gliding, towing me after it while I tried to avoid its hind claws. As it neared the water's edge, I raised my left hand to grab the leash above the loop that held my right wrist, praying for some slack. The alligator froze, rotating that yellow eye to look at me.

I froze too, and again we lay like that, carnivore and carnivee. Eventually, some wattage kicked on in her brain, and she started sliding again. I pulled as steadily and stealthily as I dared with my left hand, to ease the loop over my other wrist. My right hand felt entirely numb, and it was more drag than muscle that finally allowed it to slide free.

I released the leash, and again the she-gator froze, rotating that eye over me like a searchlight beam. Finally, she powered up again, gliding into the water to stash the rest of her meal for another day.

I backed away and stood up, rubbing my wrist. Yards away, the lieutenant lay sprawled on the ground.

When I got near, I saw his ankle was caught in the jaws of a trap. Who the hell—poachers? Smugglers?

I tried to open the mechanism, but the spring was awkward and stiff from rust. It had a bracket to accept something like a jack handle. I had to do something. The trap's jaws had crushed bone, and were scissoring through the lieutenant's flesh with every

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effort I made to open it.

The rifle. It lay beyond him. I was afraid of other buried traps, but I eased over and snatched it up.

"Jesus! No, no," he rasped. "I don't mean to be such a bastard . . . Christ, pal, c'mon . . ."

"Oh, shut the hell up," I said, and levered the barrel of the rifle into the bracket. It released the ratchet. But damn, the pawl would not stay open. I reached for my wallet and took out my Visa card. Again, I levered open the jaws, and slipped the credit card under the pawl. Perfect, although it didn't leave much of the plastic remaining. When I pulled the jaws back, his ankle flopped out. I tied his web belt above his ankle. What a fleshy mess; it would be awhile before he could dance again at his fancy political fund-raisers.

I stood to reorient myself and reconnoiter. A few yards away lay a second trap that had been sprung up from the mud. It too was covered with blood, recent blood, not the lieutenant's. Some unknown party had been burying traps just under the sand with vicious effect.

The second trap looked grisly, with more shreds of flesh and gore than the lieutenant's. Its teeth also held tatters of an inmate's distinctive uniform, just like the one the professor was wearing.

I took out a Bonnie Bag, a ziplock evidence pouch, and turned it inside out. Using it as a mitten, I collected the shreds of flesh and remnants of cloth. Sealing it, I knelt and studied the gouges in the ground.

Then I prepared to leave. Every pound was going to count, so I stripped off the lieutenant's shoes, his fancy hunting vest with knives and darts and fire-starters and GPS locators and God-knows-what-all in the pockets, and piled them on a stump. Collecting the rifle and medic's kit, I set them on top, bullets too, and as an afterthought, added my own handkerchief for no very good reason.

Bending down, I heaved the lieutenant up into a fireman's carry. Clutter fell from his pockets: knife, coins, gum. Crap. I saw I hadn't picked up my own billfold when I had got out the credit card. To hell with it; he was on my shoulders, there were only two bucks in my wallet. I left the junk where it lay.

I stumbled back through the gathering dusk. At one point, the lieutenant, who'd been fading in and out of consciousness, stirred and said, "Where's my rifle?"

"You want me to carry the rifle, or carry you?"

He fell silent after that, or, more likely, passed out again.

It had grown so dark that I could have missed the boat, save for the men smoking and talking. When I shouted, the Cubans shuffled the boat about and lifted the lieutenant from me. My muscles breathed prayers of thanks.

"We've got a problem," said Chuck in the darkness.

"What now?"

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"That collision . . . it damaged our fuel tank. It's been leaking and we don't have enough left to fill the carb bowl."

"Terrific." I was quiet for a moment, listening resignedly to croaks and huge bellows in the dark, like several-hundred-pound bullfrogs, maybe. You never knew what might come up out of that muck at you.

Click.

Click.

Click, click, click. Lights snapped on left, right, and behind us, scalding our eyes.

"Looks like you boys're outa your depth," a voice said. It was deep, so deep it sounded like that mama gator. Behind the blinding searchlight, I glimpsed a forearm the thickness of my thigh. There wasn't much to say, so we didn't.

"You boys runnin' drugs? We don't much like drugs."

"No," Chuck said. "We're cops."

"We don't much like cops, neither."

"Don't look like no cops, Max." A new voice, younger. "They look like crap."

"Shut up, boy," said Max. The light held by the young voice snapped out. "What 'bout them Cubanos? They run drugs?"

"Them?" said Chuck. "Nah, no drugs. One of them just cut up his sister's boyfriend. The other hot-wires cars. No drugs."

"Okay," said Max approvingly.

With typical bad timing, the lieutenant came to. "You, I demand you assist us."

"Why would we want to do that?" I could hear crude amusement in Max's voice.

"Because we got one prisoner dead—maybe two, a man snake-bit, and me with a chewed up ankle."

"Alligator?"

"Traps," said the lieutenant between obscenities.

The young voice picked up again. "You mess with our traps?"

"Shut up," said Max to one side, then to us, "You hear *that* out there? You see *that?*" He shone the spotlight beyond our boat, illuminating the water to our port.

Dozens and dozens of floating lamps starred the water.

"Them's eyes, and under them eyes is gators. Now *we* don't got to *do* nothin', 'cept come back in a couple of days and see if the skeeters, and the varmits, and the gators left anything of you. I tell you that so's you 'preciate your position."

"You got that right," said Chuck.

"You got an empty fuel can?" Max said.

Chuck shook his head.

"You got fifty bucks?"

We all started digging. The lieutenant started swearing when I pulled his wallet from his pants.

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"Got three twenties."

"That'll do." That arm the size of my thigh handed over a red tank.

"After we leave, you look careful to the east, you see a red light miles off in the distance. That'll be a radio tower. Steer ten to the right, and you get back where you come from. 'Course the deal is, we don't see you out here again."

"You got no right to—" the lieutenant *oof*ed to a halt when Chuck's elbow slipped.

"We're much obliged," I said.

The lights snapped out. We didn't hear a thing, but when the blue spots faded from our eyes, nothing—no one—was there. Off in the distance, we spotted a red light winking above the horizon.

I stopped talking, and it was quiet in the cool gloom of the bar for a while. Finally, the stranger spoke.

"What happened to the lieutenant?"

"Saved his foot—barely. Did a lot of television interviews and became a hero. Got promoted to captain. He took a desk job for a while, then quit to become a movie consultant. 'Scuse me, a *film consultant,* he calls himself. When he shows up slumming, it's all 'Clint this . . .' and 'Sean that . . .'"

"Your friend Chuck? How's he doing?"

"He's a Metro-Dade sergeant now. Gaggle of kids. I'm a godfather eight or nine times over. Oh, and the judge, he was retired. Forcibly, if the rumors were true. He'd become a complete embarrassment to the bench."

"You know anything more about the professor guy?"

"Well, most people figure he's dead. The lieutenant, before he's completely back on his feet, he gets himself promoted to captain, like I said, and first thing he does is send what you would call a posse out into that swamp again. Trackers, hunters, boats, and lots of dogs, big reward money. Four, maybe five weeks of hunting, they come dragging their asses back one afternoon. Would not believe their story."

"What was that?"

"They find a shack—you know, a thatched chickee—got an old Indian woman living in it. She's been getting medical treatment, see, and they figured it was the professor helping her. They set up an ambush. Sure enough, they spot this guy coming through the trees. He senses them somehow, and takes off again. The boys get a shot off, but then the story gets weird from there."

"How's that?"

"Well, most outsiders figure it was a Doberman got loose, but those trackers insist it was a Florida panther, but whatever it was, they all swore *something* set upon the professor. Got ahold of his arm, ripping and snarling, and they all agreed, be it dog or puma, that the professor'd had it."

The man nodded. "Dogs go for the jugular, but big cats like that,

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they clamp on with their teeth, use their hind legs to disembowel their prey. Takes just seconds, very effective hunters."

"Wasn't in this case. The boys figured it was all over and the marksmen weren't about to shoot an endangered species to save a felon. But instead of the professor trying to jerk loose, he did the opposite. The son of a bitch jams his entire arm down the panther's throat. Suddenly, the animal hasn't got him, *he's got it.* The prey turned the tables on the cat. The man could have killed it that way, but he just struggled with it until the beast went unconscious and then they claim the professor made his escape. Those hunters were in some awe of him after that. He's like a legend out there now."

I looked down at my guest's wrists again, brown and gnarled and scarred.

"Another funny thing. Ever hear of ironwood? What old-timers call guaiac?"

"You mean *lignum vitae,* one of the densest woods on the planet?"

"Yeah, that's the stuff. Short little tree almost wiped out by the Navy during the world wars. Hard as iron."

"Guaiac is actually tougher than iron. Self-lubricating, too. Can't be worked with woodworking tools; has to be machine milled."

"Yeah, that's it. I never knew of it myself, till I started hearing about a guy trading antique motorboats and even a couple of old airplanes that had been salvaged from the swamp. Damnedest thing—bearings and shafts were repaired with parts made of this guaiac wood. You haven't seen an engine till you've seen one with wooden rockers and bearings." I dried another glass and held it up to the light, shaking my head. "Swamp folk say this same guy makes black beer from holly, has a hell of a kick. Like to try that someday."

The stranger tipped the last of his wine down his throat. "Yaupon Holly, almost the only North American plant that contains caffeine. Timocua Indians brewed a stiff black tea from it."

The man nodded with a leathery grimace he might have thought was a smile, swiveled off the stool and onto his crutches. As he headed toward the door, I called out. "Hey, mister, your paper bag."

He shook his head, not looking back. "Not mine," he said. "It's yours."

He swung out the door, and evaporated with the heat thermals sizzling off the pavement. The door swung closed, leaving it cool and quiet.

I washed the wineglasses, dried them, lifted them into the rack. Picking up the sack, I opened it. My old wallet, complete with my ex-wife's photo, wasn't wholly unexpected, but the paper napkin brought a twist to my lips. It was written out as a check, probably the value to a penny of the gear I had left by the stump.

I never did cash that napkin. Just hung it in a glass frame behind my bar. ●

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THE PULP ARTIST'S WIFE

by Edward D. Hoch

Mike Trapper had joined me as a partner more years ago than I cared to remember, and while we still had clients who came through the door of Darlan & Trapper looking for "the young one," in truth Trapper was now forty years old, and married with a couple of kids. This September morning was our part-time secretary's day off and Mike was at his desk opening mail. He passed me a check from a client we'd been hounding for weeks.

"Quilty finally paid up, Al."

"Great. Let's get it in the bank before he changes his mind."

"Let me open the rest of this. Maybe there's something else for the bank."

He slit another envelope and began reading a lengthy letter. "What's that? Another wealthy man with a wandering daughter? Those are my favorite cases."

He finished reading and frowned. "It's an invitation to attend a conference in Austin, Texas. *The Artist and the Eye.* It's a tribute to some ageing artists who painted covers for paperbound books and pulp magazines back in the nineteen fifties. Hell, that's before I was born!"

"What do they want you for?" *Because you're the young one,* I thought.

"Well, a lot of those covers showed private investigators, so they think it would be great to have three or four real private eyes from around the country. *The Artist and the Eye*—get it?"

"I get it, but they don't get us. We don't fly halfway across the country for nothing."

"Actually, they're offering to pay my airfare and hotel room."

Last year Edward D. Hoch was an honoree at the annual Pulpcon, where fans of the so-called pulp magazines gather to sell and trade old magazines and discuss the stories and art that appeared in them. There was no original art for sale. "However, one fellow did come up to me and say that his father painted the cover for a magazine I'd brought, and his mother was the model for the girl on the cover. That triggered the plot for this story," Mr. Hoch told *EQMM.*

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I grunted. "You can go if you want. I'll hold down the fort here."

"It's the week before Thanksgiving. The weather gets pretty rotten around here then. We might both enjoy a few days in Texas."

"Not me." I went back to a report I was writing on a security case.

"I'd like to go. You sure you won't mind?"

"Go ahead. Take Marla along, make a little vacation out of it."

He didn't argue, and he e-mailed them the same day accepting their invitation. I thought no more about it until early November. Mike was working on a profitable industrial espionage case that stood to provide us with a good payday. The only trouble was that the whole thing would come together the week before Thanksgiving, exactly the time he'd promised to attend the Texas conference.

"I don't see how I can go, Al," he told me. "Can you call them and get me out of it?"

"No problem," I agreed and got on the phone.

The conference organizer, a youthful-sounding man named Wayne Collins, was not happy to hear from me. "Look," he said with something like a sigh, "we've been promoting this event for two months now on the Internet and in fan publications. We had three private detectives who'd agreed to take part in this, and one of the others has dropped out because of illness. We can't afford to lose Mike Trapper, too."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," I told him. "He's too busy this month to make the trip."

There was a moment's silence on the other end, and then, "How about you, Mr. Darlan? Could you come in his place?"

"I don't do conferences."

"It would be a great help to us if you could. After all, your partner agreed—"

"What would be involved?" I asked, beginning to weaken a bit.

"Just one discussion panel with the other detective and a couple of cover artists. And some of the attendees might want to have individual chats with you, of course. But the entire schedule is very loose. You'd only have to be here for three days, and of course we'd pay all your expenses."

"Who's the other P.I.?"

"Rex Higgins from St. Louis. Know him?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Then it's perfect! Can we count on you?"

"I guess so. Let me make a note of the dates and the hotel."

Mike was pleasantly surprised to learn that I'd agreed to fill in for him. Our secretary Elizabeth would work full time for the three days I'd be away, so the office would be covered even without Mike. On Wednesday I left my gun at home and caught the plane to Austin. I was at the Longhorn Hotel by late afternoon. It was a high-rise at the edge of the city, with a huge atrium that was

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mostly filled at the moment with a convention of dentists. It took me awhile to find the much smaller contingent for *The Artist and the Eye.* In fact the first person I recognized was Rex Higgins.

"Al! They told me you were coming! How's it been?"

"Fine, Rex. Good to see you again." Higgins was in his mid fifties, maybe six or eight years younger than me. We'd worked together five years earlier on a runaway daughter who'd turned up in St. Louis with her boyfriend. Higgins was a smart private eye, better than me when it came to the modern stuff like computers and electronic surveillance gear, and one of the most honest and law-abiding men in our sometimes shady business. "How'd they lure you down here for this thing, anyway?"

Rex Higgins shrugged. He had a trick of spreading a shrug through his entire body. "It sounded like fun, and it's a slow season for us. We do mostly family work—infidelity, divorce, runaways—and those things slow down just before the holidays."

"Have you met this fellow Wayne Collins?"

Higgins nodded. "He's just a kid. I'm sure he wasn't even alive when most of those covers were painted. Come on, I'll take you downstairs and introduce you."

We took the escalator down one level to the meeting rooms and he led me into a large area where the walls were decorated with airbrush paintings of women in low-cut dresses, mostly red, being menaced by various thugs but about to be rescued by our hero. Occasionally, the woman in red was the killer herself, about to finish off a hapless male. "What is this?" I asked.

Higgins smiled. "That was my reaction at first too. These are original cover paintings for magazines and paperbacks from the 'fifties and 'sixties. The artists or their heirs have them for sale. It's the big attraction for this gathering. You and I are just window-dressing."

Wayne Collins was indeed young, though hardly a kid, as Higgins had described him. He wore a sandy moustache and spoke with a Texas accent that was full of enthusiasm. "It's so good you both could come! Collecting pulp and paperback covers has been an obsession with me all my life. I help organize these shows every year and this time we've got over a dozen original cover paintings for sale."

"Who buys them?" Rex Higgins wondered.

"Collectors. They're a form of pop art, often with a bit of sex and violence thrown in. Occasionally they end up being quite valuable."

"There must be thousands of them around," I suggested.

"Not as many as you'd think. These cover artists sometimes painted over their pictures to save the cost of a canvas. But you'll hear all about it during our sessions."

The first evening was rather dull, with an occasional collector asking if either of us might be one of the artists. I suppose we both looked about the right age for it. But once we'd appeared on Thurs-

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day's panel and been questioned about the real experiences of a private detective, the collectors pretty much ignored us. Security work and insurance fraud rarely involved girls in red dresses. They were more interested in the artists, who often saved modeling fees by painting their wives or girlfriends into the violent cover scenes.

After our panel I was surprised when we were approached by a middle-aged woman as we relaxed over a couple of beers in the hotel bar. "I enjoyed your talk earlier. It's not every day I get to meet a couple of real private eyes." She was probably in her fifties, with a few strands of gray hair visible above her forehead. She wore a gray tailored suit, which suggested an office job somewhere.

"We're not like the P.I.'s in those old pulps," Rex assured her.

"I know that from your panel. Still, I wonder if either of you could help me. My name is Valerie Stetco. Perhaps you've heard my late husband mentioned here. He was a fine pulp artist in the early nineteen fifties, barely out of high school, and by the time we married in nineteen seventy-one he'd moved on to paperback covers. I started out as his model, and you can recognize me on some of the magazines for sale here. You'll see his name, *Stetco,* in the lower right corner. There are four paintings for sale but I'm not in any of those. I want to know where they came from and who's selling them."

"I'm sure the conference organizer, Wayne Collins, could tell you that," I suggested.

"He could but he won't. He says the seller swore him to secrecy."

"Why is it so important to you?"

"My husband died two years ago under mysterious circumstances. We were separated but never divorced. He was twenty years older than me and he'd moved here to Austin after we split. One night the car he was driving went into the Colorado River. His death was ruled an accident and when I came here from Denver for the funeral the detective told me it might have been suicide. He said it wouldn't be the first seventy-one-year-old man to get tired of living and drive his car into a tree or the river. But that wasn't the Aaron Stetco I knew. He loved life too much for that."

"What do the paintings have to do with his death?" Rex asked.

"He told me once they'd be mine after he died. Now they're someone else's. I want to know who."

"Any ideas?"

She shrugged. "I rarely talked to him anymore, but once he mentioned a woman named Bess O'Rourke. She was some sort of performer at a local restaurant. I haven't been able to track her down."

Rex and I exchanged glances. "I guess Mrs. Stetco doesn't need both of us on this," I said. A few phone calls would probably locate the woman in no time. "Why don't you handle it?"

He turned to her. "Is that agreeable with you, Mrs. Stetco?"

"Fine."

I left some money for the beers and stood up. Somehow it didn't

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seem like my sort of case and I was happy to let him have it. My flight was booked for the following day and I'd be on my way home then. Meanwhile, curiosity took me back to the conference hall to look at some of Aaron Stetco's covers. They were well enough done for their purpose, one showing a villain about to toss a girl off a bridge with a cement block weighting her down. Another showed a masked killer about to stab a struggling girl, while a third showed a man with a broken bottle defending a woman in a torn dress from some unseen menace. Like the others offered for sale, these all seemed to be airbrushed. I was a bit surprised when I came upon a fourth painting bearing Stetco's familiar signature, this one done in oils. It showed a car chase on a narrow road, with one car being forced dangerously close to a drop-off above some water. The thick layers of oil paint added a realistic texture to the landscape that was almost three-dimensional. I studied it for a few minutes, wondering if somehow Aaron Stetco had foreseen the moment of his own death.

In the morning I started packing my bag and then left it to go down for breakfast. As soon as I stepped off the elevator I was aware of a buzz in the lobby, with small groups in conversation. Wayne Collins was with one group and when he saw me he left them to bring me the news. "Somebody killed Rex Higgins last night," he said.

"What?" I couldn't believe I'd heard him correctly.

"Higgins. He's dead. Someone shot him by his car in the hotel parking lot, around one this morning. They think it was an attempted robbery."

A few hours later I was on the phone to Mike Trapper at our office. I told him what had happened and said I was staying on in Austin for a few days. "I have to find who killed him," I said.

"Why? Are you acting like Sam Spade or something? Higgins wasn't your partner. You hardly knew him."

"This woman approached the two of us, and I gave her to Mike. If he was killed because of that, I have some responsibility. Rex Higgins was a good man, an honest man. You don't find too many of those in our business."

"Al, don't be foolish! If the police think it was an attempted robbery, they're probably right. Just get on the plane and come home."

"I'll call you tomorrow," I said, and hung up. He was probably right, but that didn't change my mind. There are some things you just have to do.

Sergeant Scour was the detective in charge, and the first one I talked to. He was a slender man with a glum expression, maybe from seeing too many killings like Rex's. "The hotel is in a low-crime area," he told me. "A shooting like this is pretty unusual, unless it was a carjacker. We have a couple of ejected cartridge cases, but that's about all."

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"If it was a carjacker, why didn't he take the car?"

"Can't tell you that. You say he was working on a case?"

"A woman named Valerie Stetco hired him to find the owner of some cover paintings offered for sale at *The Artist and the Eye* conference. They'd been painted by her late husband and she felt they belonged to her."

"Stetco. That name is familiar."

"He was killed two years ago when his car went into the river."

Sergeant Scour nodded. "I remember it now. Accident or suicide."

"Or murder?"

"We ruled that out. The man was seventy-odd years old, separated from his wife and living alone. He was just tired of life."

"I understood he had a girlfriend, an entertainer named Bess O'Rourke."

"I know her. She's a swinger."

"A prostitute?"

He smiled. "Not that sort of swinger. She swings back and forth from the ceiling at the Barbary Coast Club. It's part of the entertainment."

"Naked?"

"No. It's a family restaurant."

"Did she have any connection with Stetco?"

He shook his head. "Far as I know she's clean. Had a boyfriend who did time for a jewelry-store heist, but she wasn't involved."

"Did Valerie Stetco say anything to you about her husband's cover paintings?"

"I don't believe I've ever met her. But if she hired Rex Higgins I'll certainly want to question her."

Next I sought out Wayne Collins. The conference was winding down, but there were still a few groups in the downstairs hallways talking about the killing. Collins himself was changing the signs outside the conference room when I found him. "Have you seen Mrs. Stetco around this morning?" I asked.

"Not yet. We sold all four of her husband's cover paintings this morning but I don't know if she gets any of the money."

"Who bought them?"

"I'd have to check with our treasurer. I didn't handle it directly."

"Who gets the money if she doesn't?"

"Stetco's next of kin, whoever that may be. I understand they were divorced."

"Not according to her. Just separated."

He shrugged. "It's out of my hands."

"Do you know a woman named Bess O'Rourke?"

He smiled. "Sure, everyone knows Bess. She's a fixture in this city. Does her act up at the Barbary Coast Club."

"I heard she was a friend of Aaron Stetco."

"Never knew the man so I can't help you there."

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"Look, go talk to your money man and find out who bought Stetco's paintings. It might be important."

He sighed and went off to find him and I trailed behind. The man in charge of sales was an older fellow named Reuben Balforth with black hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and thick eyeglasses. He was seated at a table in one corner of the large room, next to a dealer offering miniature pulp covers printed on neckties. He told Collins, "We just sold one of the Salters from an early *EQMM* cover. They bring good money."

"This is Al Darlan," Collins said.

Balforth peered at me through his eyeglasses. "I know. I was at your session yesterday, Mr. Darlan. It went very well. We were all sorry to hear about Mr. Higgins. Did you know him well?

"I'd worked with him once on an investigation. I'd like to know who's purchasing those four Stetco paintings."

Balforth opened a ledger on his table. "Man named Chet Finegold. He's a regular at these conferences. Paid eight hundred each for the three airbrush paintings and twelve hundred for the oil painting of the car being forced off the road."

"Any idea where those were published?" I asked.

"I think the girl with the cinderblock may have been used on a nineteen-fifties mystery digest cover. I don't know that the oil was ever published in this country, though it may have been used in England. It reminds me a bit of the jacket on a British reprint of Wade Miller's first novel. If you look close under his name there's a date—nineteen ninety-two."

"I'm surprised he was still painting then. How old would he have been?"

"Stetco? Born in nineteen thirty-two, he'd only have been sixty."

"Who put the paintings up for sale?"

Balforth shook his head. "Sorry, we can't reveal that. Sworn to secrecy."

"This is a murder investigation," I reminded him.

"But you're not the police."

I had no answer for that. "When's he picking up the paintings?"

"Tomorrow morning, after the conference ends."

I left them and headed for my car, but before I got there I was intercepted by Rex's client, Valerie Stetco. "Did you hear about Mr. Higgins?" she asked, hurrying to catch up to me.

"I heard. Terrible thing."

"Did he talk to you before he died, give you any information on how his investigation was going?"

"No. We had no contact after I left him with you yesterday."

"Do you think he learned something about my husband's death?"

"It would have been awfully fast. He was only on the case about—what?—eight hours?"

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"Someone has bought Aaron's paintings."

"So I heard. Do you know this guy Chet Finegold?"

"I never heard of him. Can you find him for me, tell him the paintings belong to me?"

"He's picking them up tomorrow. I'll try to be here."

"Thank you. I'll pay you the same as Mr. Higgins."

She reached in her purse but I waved it away. "I'm not working for you. I'm doing it for Rex."

I asked the doorman for directions to the Barbary Coast Club and went off to find my rental car in the hotel lot.

Though it gave the appearance of a swank private club on the outskirts of Austin, the Barbary Coast was open to all. This early in the evening there were a number of family groups taking advantage of the early-bird specials. It was a Friday and the fish fry seemed especially popular. At the far end of the main dining room there was a lighted stage with a child's swing hanging down from the high ceiling. "Is Bess on tonight?" I asked the hostess as she led me to a small table.

"After six," she said and handed me a menu.

I ordered a glass of white wine and the fish fry. Presently a dark-haired woman strode onto the stage almost unnoticed and took her place on the swing. She wore a diaphanous pink gown that seemed to cover her more than it actually did. She started swinging in tune to some background music, attracting the attention of nearby tables, and as she swung the ropes gradually raised her higher above the stage. When she was within ten or fifteen feet of the ceiling she swung back and forth with such vigor that her feet touched the room's acoustical tiles. Each time she did it a cheer went up from the diners. Obviously they were used to watching Bess O'Rourke's performance.

She kept it up for the better part of an hour before being lowered back to the stage. There she acknowledged the applause with a little bow and hurried off. I was almost finished with my fish fry by that time. I paid the check and went around backstage, which proved to be the kitchen. She was sitting on top of a table, swinging her legs as if she couldn't stop. "That was quite a performance," I said, ignoring the hostile looks from the waiters and chefs.

She studied my face and I saw that she was not quite as young as she'd appeared at a distance. "Do I know you?" The legs stopped swinging.

I handed her my card. "Got time for a few questions?"

"What questions? I already talked to the other one."

"Who? Rex Higgins?"

"I guess that was his name. Last night."

"He's dead now. You don't keep up on the news."

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"You're kidding me."

"Wish I was. Shot in his hotel parking lot." I studied her green eyes and said, "He asked you about Aaron Stetco, didn't he?"

"Aaron Stetco's been dead two years. I don't know anything about him."

"You were his girlfriend for a time, weren't you?"

"The man was seventy-one when he died. Do I look like I need to date old men?"

"His wife was twenty years younger and he seemed to like that until they split. Maybe he was looking for another young one."

I could see I was close to the truth. She slid off the table and stood facing me. "Is there a point to all this?"

"Stetco died in possession of four of his cover paintings, which are now being sold through *The Artist and the Eye* conference. His wife wants to know who's offering them for sale."

"He told me they were divorced years ago."

"Not according to her. She claims the paintings are hers."

"That's what the other guy told me last night, but I don't believe it."

I took a deep breath. "I'm not interested in the paintings, Bess. I want the person who killed Rex Higgins. Would that be you?"

"I've got a hundred witnesses to swear I was up on the swing last night."

"He was shot around one o'clock. You telling me you work that late on a Thursday night?"

"I swing as long as there are diners. On weeknights the kitchen closes at ten or so, but they linger on for a hour after that. I probably stopped swinging around eleven, but then I changed my clothes and had a couple of drinks at the bar. I was here till one."

"What time did Higgins talk to you?"

"Around eleven, just after I finished. Then he left and I went out to the bar."

It was a flimsy alibi at best, but at the moment I couldn't think of any motive she'd have for killing Rex. "Who were you drinking with? Can anyone vouch for your presence?"

"My boyfriend," she answered with some reluctance.

"You had a boyfriend besides Stetco?"

"He was away when I was with Aaron."

"Away." I was remembering something Sergeant Scour had mentioned about her boyfriend serving time for a jewelry-store heist. "In the slammer, you mean?"

"Well . . . yes."

"For how long?"

"He got a bum deal. They made him serve thirteen years of a fifteen-year sentence before he got parole."

"What did he do?"

"He was the driver in a jewelry-store robbery. He didn't even

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know what they were up to." She dug into her purse for a cigarette. "You're asking me the same questions as the other guy."

"Tell me more about your boyfriend. You say he got a bum deal."

"Some of the loot was never recovered and they offered him an early parole if he told them where it was. But he couldn't tell them what he didn't know."

"What happened to the others in the robbery?"

"One was killed in a shootout with the cops and the other two are locked away for twenty-five-to-life. They figured Harvey would talk because he got the shortest sentence."

"Harvey?"

"Harvey Spears, my boyfriend." It seemed an unlikely term for a middle-aged woman to be using, but I suppose it was as good as any.

"Did Rex question you about Stetco's paintings?"

"He sure did. He said Stetco's wife claimed the paintings were hers because they were still married. I told him that's not what I heard. I gave all four of them to Wayne Collins months ago so he could put a price on them and list them in the show's catalogue. He said they'd probably bring two or three thousand."

"Why did you want to sell them now?"

She shrugged, exhaling a wisp of cigarette smoke. "Aaron was dead and they were taking up space in my apartment. With Harvey finally getting out of prison I wanted room for a nice big bed. I wanted to surprise him."

"Was he surprised?"

"You bet he was! When I told him I was selling the paintings he gave me a black eye! I couldn't work for three nights."

"Why was he so upset?"

"He said I should have more respect for a great artist."

"Did he know Stetco before he went to prison?"

"Just briefly. Aaron had moved to Austin after splitting with his wife, and saw my act here. We had a drink after the show."

"What year was this?"

"Probably late nineteen ninety-one. I was still with Harvey then, and the three of us went out a few times. Aaron wanted to paint us. But then Harvey got involved in that robbery and ended up in prison. Aaron and I just sort of fell in together after that. We had some good years. He moved into my apartment and brought his paintings with him."

"He was close to sixty when you met him. What was the attraction?"

"He had a little money and he loved me. What more did I need? He told me he always went for younger women, just like you guessed."

"What do you know about his death?"

"Not much. He went out one night and never came back. They fished his car out of the river with him inside."

"Do you think he killed himself?"

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"Maybe. He'd been gambling a lot, at the Indian casinos and on those floating casinos along the Gulf Coast. I went with him a few times but I hated to see him lose. Then we heard that Harvey was getting out. That seemed to panic him. I guess he thought I'd leave him and go back with Harvey. As it turned out, it was nearly two years later before they paroled Harvey. Aaron was long gone and I was selling his paintings so I could afford a new bed."

"Where is Harvey Spears now?"

"Right now? Probably at my apartment, waiting for me to get home."

"Suppose I wait until you finish for the night and go along with you. I'd like to talk with him."

"About what?"

"About that black eye he gave you."

Bess O'Rourke had an ageing garden apartment on the ground floor of a project in a middle-class neighborhood not yet fallen on hard times. Approaching the place with her across a darkened parking lot at midnight, I wished I hadn't left my gun back home. Harvey Spears sounded like a tough customer.

Bess unlocked the door and called out, "It's me, Harv. I've got someone with me."

He appeared from the bedroom wearing pants and a T-shirt, his feet bare. "Who . . . ?"

"Name's Al Darlan," I said, showing my ID. "I've got a few questions."

"What about?" His skin had the pasty appearance of someone who'd lived too long under a rock, or in a prison cell.

"An investigator named Rex Higgins was murdered last night, in the parking lot of the Longhorn Hotel."

"What about it?" His gaze shifted to Bess. "What'd you tell him?"

She seemed to have taken courage from my presence. "Just that you gave me a black eye for selling Aaron's paintings."

Spears whipped a hand behind his back and it reappeared holding a snub-nosed revolver he'd carried in his waistband. He took a step toward me, raising the gun. I grabbed for it, stepping down hard on his bare foot. He screamed in pain and I yanked the weapon from his hand. "Watch him," I told Bess, "while I phone the police."

"He wouldn't have shot you," she said.

"He's on parole and has a gun. Even in Texas that must be against the law."

In the morning I phoned Mike Trapper. "It's just about over," I told him. "I'll try to catch an afternoon plane."

"Did you get yourself shot yet?"

"Almost. You nearly had to scrape my name off the office door."

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"What happened?"

"I'll tell you about it when I see you."

I hung up and went downstairs to find Wayne Collins. He was in the conference room along with Balforth and a couple of others I'd seen around, taking down their signs and bundling up some unsold books and catalogues. "Has Finegold come for the paintings yet?" I asked.

"He's loading them into his SUV now, out back."

I walked through the corridor to the loading dock, where I saw two of Stetco's paintings leaning against the wall. A burly man in a leather jacket was carefully covering one of them with a protective sheet before loading it into the van. "Are you Chet Finegold?" I asked.

"That's me. You're that private eye who spoke the other night."

"You've purchased those four Stetco paintings?"

"That's right. And I've just sold them for twice what I paid. Easiest profit I ever made."

"Sold them? Who to?"

"His widow, Valerie Stetco. I'm going to pack them up and ship them to her in Denver."

"Could you hold up on that for a few minutes?"

"Here she comes now. If you doubt me you can ask her."

I turned and saw Mrs. Stetco coming down the steps from the loading dock. She was wearing slacks and a wool jacket, carrying a small suitcase. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Darlan. I wanted to say goodbye before I drive back to Denver."

"Mr. Finegold here says you're buying the paintings."

She nodded. "They won't fit in my car so he's shipping them. The more I thought about it the more I knew Aaron wanted me to have them. Mr. Finegold beat me to it, so I had to buy them from him."

"Can I speak to you privately for a moment?" I asked, steering her toward the parking lot.

"Certainly. I was pleased to hear that the O'Rourke woman's lover has been arrested. I'm sure he's the one who killed Mr. Higgins."

"I don't think so," I told her.

"What? I heard he threatened you with a gun."

"He had a snub-nosed revolver and Sergeant Scour told me he recovered two ejected cartridges near Rex's body. The killer used an automatic, not a revolver. Isn't that right, Mrs. Stetco?"

"What do you mean?"

"Rex Higgins was an honest man and a good P.I. It didn't take him any time at all to find Bess O'Rourke and hear her story, the same one she told me last night. When he found out that Harvey Spears gave her a black eye after he got out of prison and discovered she'd put the paintings up for sale, Rex must have asked himself why. Then he heard about the loot from the jewelry-store robbery that was never recovered, and he put two and two together.

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Maybe he even picked a lock Thursday night to get in here and examine the paintings. He phoned you and arranged to meet in the parking lot here around one A.M. That was when he told you the rest of the jewelry loot was hidden on the oil painting Aaron did in nineteen ninety-two, the same year Harvey Spears went to prison. He told you he must report it to the police or risk losing his license."

"How do you know that?" she wanted to know.

"Because something changed your entire plan after Thursday night. Instead of simply learning who was selling those paintings, you insisted on having them yourself, even paying this man twice what he'd paid. What happened Thursday night? Rex Higgins was shot. Not by Spears, unless the man had an unlikely second gun. More likely by you, because you were the client he would report to. You were the person who first learned he'd have to tell the police everything about the missing jewelry and the painting."

She stood there, staring at him. Finally her face seemed to crumple. "I don't have the gun anymore," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I brought it with me for protection on the drive."

"You wouldn't have shot me anyway. Come along, Mrs. Stetco."

Back home in the office the following day, I told it all to Mike Trapper. "She confessed?" he asked at the conclusion.

I nodded. "She shot Rex on the spur of the moment, to keep him from reporting to the police. The poor guy was too honest for his own good."

"What about Aaron Stetco? Was he murdered?"

"Funny thing—when Sergeant Scour and I examined that oil painting of the two cars, we found three small diamonds that had been covered with layers of oil paint. No wonder the texture seemed almost three-dimensional. But there were several other places that seemed to have been touched up, sometimes with slightly different shades of paint. The O'Rourke woman certainly didn't know the robbery loot was hidden on that painting or she never would have offered it for sale. I think Spears paid Stetco to hide the diamonds on the painting while he was in prison. There were maybe a dozen or more, covered with layers of oil paint that held them in place after it dried. But with the passing years, Aaron Stetco's gambling obsession became a serious problem. He started removing the diamonds from the painting to sell them and cover his gambling debts."

"What was he going to tell Spears?"

"I don't think he ever believed the man would be released in his lifetime. Two years ago, when parole seemed at hand, he'd come to the end of his rope. Rather than face a man who might kill him, he chose an easier way out. He remembered the subject of that painting, a car being forced off the road into the river, and ended his life that way." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

PEEK-A-BOO

by Alina Adams

"Make one sound and I blow a hole through you and the kid, both."

Tammy Kelly had no intention of making a sound. She'd been expecting this. She didn't actually realize it until the marble-size gun barrel was skewered against the fleshy part of her back where rib cage didn't quite meet hip, but she'd been expecting this ever since she'd made her decision to abscond with Phillip Day's money. What she hadn't been expecting was to be tracked down in broad daylight while standing on a subway platform in midtown Manhattan, with Teddy in the stroller in front of her, kicking his legs and blowing spit bubbles that formed a foamy goatee at the base of his chin and dripped onto the zipper of his red Baby Gap jacket.

The gun was positioned perfectly. A pulled trigger wouldn't only take a lethal chunk out of Tammy's side and intestines. It would also get Teddy squarely between the ears.

There was nowhere for Tammy to run. There was no way she could make it up the steep subway stairs dragging the stroller. And it would do her no good to scream. With a train approaching the station, no one would hear her, anyway. And besides, when she

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heard "Make one sound and I blow a hole through you and the kid, both," Tammy was inclined to believe it.

Her assailant stood pressed so close to Tammy's back that the tips of his shoes were scraping against the backs of hers. They might have been any New York family, Daddy, Mommy, Baby, casually waiting for their ride, Daddy hugging Mommy from behind to keep her warm, Mommy idly pushing the stroller back and forth to the edge of the platform to keep Baby entertained.

Alina Adams is the author of a series of ice-skating mysteries for Berkley Prime Crime. See *Murder on Ice* ('03), *On Thin Ice* ('04), and the latest, *Axel of Evil* (1/06). The world of professional skating was also the subject of her bestselling nonfiction book *Sarah Hughes: Skating to the Stars* (Berkley, '01). She makes her *EQMM* debut with a tale of an abandoned baby.

No one would be coming to help her, that much Tammy knew. And there would be no one to help Teddy. Except for her.

She had to make her decision in a split second. She was being ordered to "Turn around and start walking to the stairs. I've got you covered, don't you worry about that, honey."

The C train's doors were open for only a minute. The car was packed with commuters, most of whom weren't even looking in her direction. But there was room right at the entrance.

Room for Tammy to shove the stroller—she knew she would only have one chance, so there better be no hesitation—and make certain that Teddy was all the way into the train (carriage handles and flapping diaper bag squeezing through with a nanometer to spare) a split second before the doors closed.

Teddy felt her push him. He spun around in his seat, catching one last glimpse of Tammy through the glass paneling. Watching her disappear from view as the train pulled away, Teddy broke into a grin of sheer bliss and raised both his palms to his face.

"Peek-boo!" he yelled.

Daria Janowitz saw the whole thing.

Rather, she didn't realize she was seeing anything until it was actually over and she understood that it wasn't her imagination. The woman on the platform really had deliberately shoved her baby into the train, then walked away, arm in arm with the man by her side, never even looking back.

No one else seemed to have noticed. That, or they were doing the NYC version of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," also known as a hipper variation on *Hogan's Heroes*' "I see nothing!" No one was even glancing in the baby's direction. The little fellow, on the other hand, was definitely glancing around, his face set in that preemptive wrinkled

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brow/outstretched lower-lip pucker that could go either way, towards laughter or tears, depending on how the situation played itself out.

Daria squeezed her way past two men in almost identical camel's-hair coats hanging on to the upper handhold and discussing quarterly projections for a series of initials, to inch towards the baby.

She smiled. He considered it for a moment, then grinned back.

And somehow, Daria found herself taking him home with her.

"I can't just send Ace back," Daria explained patiently to her husband. "Not until I know what sort of home I'd be sending him back to."

"Ace?" Rich Janowitz calmly put aside the stack of book reports he'd been grading on the kitchen table and indicated the baby Daria was now feeding whole milk from a plastic bottle she'd bought at the drugstore on her way home. "He told you his name, did he?"

"Don't be silly." Daria plopped the tot on her kitchen counter while she reached for the diaper bag that was tied to the handles of his carriage and proceeded to rifle around. "I found him at the juncture for the A, C, and E trains."

"Ace," Rich repeated, resigned to the fact that his wife was insane.

"It wasn't an accident." Daria kept her voice artificially pitched and cheerful, pretending to be entertaining the baby while her words were meant for Rich. "If it were an accident the woman would have gone chasing after the train, she would have screamed for someone to pull the emergency cord. She would have done something. Something other than turn around and just walk away, I mean."

"So she abandoned her son. She did not, as far as I can see, abandon him necessarily to you."

"What if she had no choice? What if whatever was going on in her life was so horrible that leaving a year-old baby to fend for himself on the subway was the best thing she could do for him?"

"Either way, it's none of our business. I believe they have special city agencies who take care of situations like this."

"They'll just put him in a foster home. And we're licensed foster parents."

"If Bill Clinton were still president that statement would be true. Alas . . ."

"You know what some of the homes out there are like, Rich. . . ."

Their now seventeen year old son, Anthony, came to Daria and Rich as a three-year-old who'd been through so many temporary placements, he slept in his clothes, ready to leave at a moment's notice. Their fourteen-year-old daughter, Aisha, at age five didn't speak because every time she had in the past, she'd been slapped across the face.

Rich tried another tack. "So rather than call Social Services, you think it's better to give him, um, little Ace, back to the mother who

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abandoned him?"

"Of course not. Well, not until I find out why she did it. I can't make such an important decision without knowing all the facts."

"And oh, pray tell, how will you be getting those, Daria?"

Triumphant, she found what she'd been rifling for. It was a woman's wallet. Daria flipped it open. She said, "By going to the . . . let's see . . ." She located the driver's license. "The Upper West Side home of one Miss Tamara Kellerman. And asking a few questions."

A woman who left a purse with her identification in it while abandoning her child did not seem to be one who'd thought the plan out very carefully. It was a move of desperation. Intuition—rationalized by common sense—told Daria that she would not be catching Miss Kellerman at home. So, to facilitate snooping, she also took the woman's keys along for the hunt.

As Daria left her own home, Anthony and Aisha were nagging Rich to let them hold the baby while Daria's husband, who only ten minutes earlier had been insisting they couldn't possibly take care of a small child, even for a few hours, was playfully holding the little guy over his head, blowing on the soles of his bare feet to make Ace laugh, and playfully pushing away Anthony and Aisha's grasping hands. "No way, my turn first."

Ace's mother lived a few blocks above Columbia University, on the seventeenth floor of a gray, multistory building identical to at least a half-dozen others in the vicinity. Daria rang the bell before barging in. When she got no answer, she barged.

It was a two-bedroom apartment, the walls painted eggshell and decorated with the kind of art prints that were sold on every New York City street corner. Kid videos and 1980s John Hughes comedy DVDs spilled out of shelves on either side of a home entertainment center that looked like it cost more than the remaining couch, coffee table, and floor lamp combined. There were dishes—one adult, one plastic child's—in the sink, a half-assembled walker on the floor, and a grocery list on the refrigerator. This was not a home someone had left with no intention of returning.

Daria found the baby's room, pleased to note that, if you could judge by externals, Ace had been a cared-for, even indulged, little dude. The cowboy sheets on the crib matched the picture frames hung over the dresser, safely out of his reach. The changing table was well stocked with diapers, wipes, diaper-rash creams, and a sweet-smelling moisturizer. Even the Diaper Genie didn't reek of its fetid contents. A fuzzy rocking horse stood in the corner, next to a classic little red wagon filled with blocks and a stuffed bear in all-Western attire. The entire setup could have come straight from a Pottery Barn catalog, down to the faux-lasso letters on the wall spelling out "Teddy."

Teddy.

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Daria shrugged. He still looked more like an "Ace" to her.

Going back to the master bedroom, Daria checked to confirm a hunch. There were no men's clothes in the closet. Which suggested no father in the picture.

What Daria needed, she decided, was something to tell the story of Tamara and Teddy Kellerman. Something that might explain how you went from painstakingly setting up the perfect nursery to dumping your toddler in the subway.

Going by her own household, Daria first searched the apartment for a desk where Tamara may have sat to pay her bills. A few credit-card statements would go a long way towards illuminating what sort of person she'd been and what she'd been involved with. But there was no such piece of furniture. Neither did Tamara have a filing cabinet for documents, or even a basket for incoming and outgoing mail. Her closets revealed shoeboxes filled exclusively with shoes, while the pockets of her coats turned up only tissues, expired MetroCards, and receipts for incriminating items like Gerber's mashed turkey and Starbucks grande somethings.

Daria returned to Teddy's room, intending to pick up some clothes and toys to make the little guy more comfortable at her place. Something about the space didn't feel right, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Until Daria took a second sniff of the Diaper Genie, and realized that, no matter how good this particular model may have been, there was no way an excrement disposer would smell so untainted after at least a year on the job. Unless it wasn't being used to store diapers.

Daria pried open the lid and glanced inside.

And found a stack of papers that clearly hadn't fallen inside there by themselves.

She reached in, got a good grip, and took two tries to slither everything out. Daria sat down on the horsie-shaped carpet at the foot of Teddy's crib and proceeded to sort through what she quickly realized wasn't so much documents as a mound of articles clipped from newspapers, magazines, tabloids, and the Internet. All of them dealing with a single story—the rape trial of movie star Phillip Day.

Much to the snickering of her children, Daria wasn't up on the latest, or even the latest once removed, in pop culture. She hadn't been to the movies in over a year, the TV remote was perennially under dispute between Anthony and Aisha, which left no time for her to press so much as a button, and she hadn't listened to the radio since she'd given up running on the treadmill oh, maybe a decade ago. The only thing Daria knew about Phillip Day was that his dimpled, twinkling, tousled, and mock-modest features regularly stared back at her from partially defaced posters in the subway advertising blockbusters with catchy titles like *Catch Up; Stand Down;* and *Twice Around 2: One More Time.*

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The titles Daria was reading now, however, indicated that apparently Mr. Day had gone around one more time than permitted. According to tabloid after tabloid, the married father of two and Hollywood's top action star had, seven months earlier, been accused of rape by a young, unnamed New Jersey woman. A young, unnamed New Jersey single mom.

There didn't seem to be much physical evidence beyond a He Said/She Said, and many of the papers were already suggesting that the whole thing was a setup and betting that an acquittal was likely. Yet, the trial had barely begun when Day, appearing in a live press conference on *E!,* his wife by his side, announced that he and the victim had come to terms. He—not in so many words, but that was the gist of it—would shortly be cutting a hefty check. To make all her—and presumably his—pain and suffering go away.

The exact amount wasn't specified, though speculation ran from ten to twenty-five million dollars. But, whatever it was, even Daria, with her very, very weak grasp of how The Other Half lived, suspected it had to be more than the $500,000 check, a copy of which she found at the bottom of the diaper pail, made out to Tammy Kellerman and issued by the production company Philming Day.

If Teddy's mother was, as all the evidence suggested, the unnamed woman in the rape case, than she'd certainly settled cheap.

Daria stared at the figure, hoping to be struck with an answer. But once she looked even closer at the draft, she realized that it actually begged a different question: Why had the supposed settlement for a rape that happened seven months earlier been issued a little over a year before?

Daria asked Rich, "How old do you think Ace is?"

They were sitting in the kitchen, the baby between them in a makeshift high chair they'd borrowed from the neighbors. He'd jammed all ten fingers into a bowl of sliced bananas, and was waving them around like two fists of squishy jewelry.

Rich pondered the question and guessed, "Fifteen months? Maybe fourteen? He's got a couple of teeth and he can say a few words. But he's not walking very steadily. The kids and I had him on the rug and all he did was crawl around and just barely pulled himself up."

"Do you think he could be as young as a year old? Thirteen months, tops?"

"It's possible. Kids all develop so differently."

"If he's a year old, that means the check from Phillip Day would have come right when he was born. Like a payoff."

"It's possible." Rich realized that unblinking consent was all that was currently required of him.

"What if Phillip Day is Ace's father?"

"Then we've kidnapped the son of one of America's wealthiest men."

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"What if he paid off Tammy when Ace was born? But what if she got greedy and wanted more money? Only he refused to pay. That rape case could have been a setup to extort more cash out of him. The guy had a choice, either admit he's a rapist, or he fathered a bastard. Neither one would do wonders for his reputation in Hollywood, right?"

"Dar, think about it. Would a guy concerned about his reputation really rather admit he was a rapist than just someone who couldn't keep his pants zipped?"

"But he didn't admit he was a rapist. Look at the way his statement is worded. He says that he believes that she believes that it was a rape. But the implication is, he isn't admitting to doing anything wrong. I bet a lot of people, reading something like that, would buy his side of the story."

"Okay. So he's Ace's father and he paid her off a second time. How does that bring us up to the subway and you playing Pharaoh's daughter to our little Moses here?"

"I don't know," Daria admitted. But she had an idea of how she could find out.

The next day, after a morning of running Ace around so hard that he fell asleep, Daria asked Rich to keep an eye on him for just an hour while she attended to an errand.

"Don't do anything stupid," her husband warned with a sigh.

Daria promised nothing.

She was on her way to staking out Phillip Day's New York home. And she wasn't going to let a little thing like not knowing where it was stop her. Because Daria had something better than an address. Thanks to a telephoto-lens snapshot in one of the tabloids of Day picking his younger daughter, Phillipa—how cute—up from school, Daria could, just by looking at the uniform, identify where the institution was. So, at three o'clock, hoping that leaning casually on her bicycle she looked more like an overage messenger than a stalker, Daria proceeded to loiter just outside the grounds of St. Catherine's Academy.

As soon as the bell rang, she spotted Phillipa Day getting into a limo. Daria proceeded to follow them through the East Side traffic. Having given up the gym more than a decade earlier, biking was her exercise of choice. She'd never dreamed it would come in this handy, though.

The limousine dropped off Phillipa in front of a Fifth Avenue apartment building with windows overlooking the park. The chauffeur got out of the car to open the door for her. And Daria froze.

Because the man in the black uniform carrying little Phillipa's book bag was also the man she'd seen on the platform with Tammy.

"He had her killed," Daria told Rich. "Phillip Day had Tammy

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killed because he was tired of paying her off. And because he wanted his son. Or both."

"And you know this how?"

"Can you think of a better theory?"

"Daria. Please. Let's turn this over to the police. If you're right, then they can protect Ace. And you. Have you given any thought to what it means if you're right? If Phillip Day really did have this poor woman killed—"

"Well, she hasn't shown up at her apartment, and I'm telling you, she didn't take off. Not of her own volition, anyway."

"So if he did have her killed to get his hands on Ace, where exactly does that leave us and our kids? If he killed the mother of his child, do you think he'll give a damn about any of us?"

"I can't go to the police," Daria said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have any proof. All I have is my word about what I saw in the subway. We both know how the system works when it comes to kids. The first thing they're going to do is return Ace to his natural father. That's always the first thing they do. And that means we'll be handing Ace over to the man who had his mother killed. I can't do that. I can't go to the police until I have proof that Phillip Day killed Tammy."

While giving Ace his bath, dressing him in blue jammies from home, and rocking him to sleep, Daria tried to figure out what her next step should be. Looking at the clock and realizing that it was still ten minutes to six in Los Angeles gave her an idea.

She took the copy of the check from Philming Day and dialed the production company's main number, asking to speak to the accounting department. Once connected, she identified herself as an IRS agent, figuring that should get the flunky's attention (only a flunky would still be at work this late, and even a flunky would be itching to go home). She explained that they needed to see a copy of the initial request authorizing Tammy Kellerman's payment, ASAP, and rattled off her fax number as if she expected him to already be dialing. Daria gambled he would be too nervous not to do as she asked, and too eager to leave to not do it right away. She really didn't want him waiting to consult with a supervisor or anyone who might ask for silly things like credentials or just cause.

"Yes, ma'am, I think I can get that for you. Do you have the check number, by any chance?"

Within ten minutes, the fax was coming in over her machine.

"What are you doing?" Rich asked.

"Creating a paper trail between Phillip Day and Tammy Kellerman. The check was written by his production company. It was signed by an accountant. He can easily claim he knew nothing about it. But if I get the original request, it will prove that he was

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the one who originally put in for the check to be cut."

"You're a scary woman, honey."

"Thank you, darling."

Scary, but not always right.

Daria yanked the barely inked document out of the machine and hurriedly twizzled her finger down the page, looking for who authorized the payment.

There it was, in black and white.

The person who requested Tammy's payoff was one Nicole Day. Phillip's wife.

The next morning, Daria was back in front of the Fifth Avenue building. Only this time, she wasn't looking like a bike messenger. This time, she wore her most conservative gray suit, her hair wound up into a bun and shellacked for good measure, going for an East Side charity-matron look. She walked up to the doorman, handed him a sealed envelope, smiled politely, and asked if he might deliver the message to Mrs. Phillip Day as soon as possible. The doorman promised that it would be run up momentarily, and have a nice day, ma'am.

Daria thanked him, then crossed the street, taking a seat on a bench just inside the park. Opening a *New York Times* she'd brought along for the occasion, she waited. Sitting a few feet away, also holding a newspaper and pretending to be engrossed in the *Daily News*'s latest sensational headline, was Rich. He may not have been able to talk his wife out of dropping the whole scheme, but he also wasn't able to let her just go traipsing off murderer-hunting as if it were a trip to the supermarket. As long as Daria was being insane, the least he could do was cover her back.

The note to Nicole Day read: "I believe this might be of interest to you."

Daria included a copy of the Philming Day invoice and wrote on the back, "I'll be waiting for you across the street in the park, holding a *New York Times.* Kindly don't keep me waiting."

She didn't.

It took exactly twenty-seven minutes from the time Daria dropped off the note till she looked up to see Mrs. Day storming in her direction. She looked to be about five foot five, but the three-inch heels and black silk shirt with billowing Gypsy sleeves made her seem like Death's better-dressed younger sister. She towered over Daria, so furious that she didn't even bother wondering if she got the right person before plopping herself down on the bench and hissing, "What paper do you work for?"

This wasn't *The Usual Suspects.* Daria wasn't good at improvising. She looked down into her lap and offered the easiest lie. *The*

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New York Times.

"What do I have to do to keep you from printing this story?"

"You could tell me the truth," Daria offered.

"If Phillip finds out about this, it will ruin our marriage. He'll never forgive me."

"Phillip doesn't know?" Up till now, Daria had been assuming the movie star was using his wife as a front to put an extra layer of deniability between him, Tammy, and Teddy.

"Of course not. You think he'd voluntarily stand trial as a rapist?"

"Well . . . He wasn't convicted. It doesn't seem to have hurt his popularity." That last part, Daria had researched by reading a few copies of *Variety.*

"Phillip Day is not the sort of man who wants it believed that he might ever need to rape anyone. He's worked hard for his ladies'-man reputation. He enjoys it. Regardless of what it might do to me."

She looked so genuinely crushed that Daria couldn't help offering, "Well, at least the trial will probably keep other women from accepting invitations to his hotel room, don't you think?"

Nicole snorted. In a genteel, Upper East Side sort of way, so that it sounded more like a delicate sigh. But the attitude was pure snort. "That was the plan. Although my intention was to scare Phillip straight, not his potential conquests. Still, beggars can't be choosers, I suppose."

"What?" Daria suddenly felt as if she'd been having a different conversation here. "The rape trial was a plan of yours? You set your own husband up?"

"It was the best thing I could think of to make him keep his pants on . . ." Nicole trailed off as the full implication of Daria's cluelessness sunk in. "That's not what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I—uh." She could lie. Now would be an excellent time, actually, to lie. But Daria didn't have one handy. "No," she confessed. "I didn't think . . . I didn't realize . . . This check to Tammy Kellerman, it was to set up your husband?"

"What did you think it was for?"

"Teddy."

"Teddy? Who is Teddy?"

"Tammy's son."

"Oh, is that his name? I knew she had a child, I didn't know what he was called. Why in the world do you think I would pay Tammy for her son?"

"Because. Isn't he Phillip's son, too? The date on the check, it's a little more than a year ago, and I thought—"

"There is absolutely no way that boy could be Phillip's. The first time he met her was that night in the hotel room. She was just some single mom willing to do a job for me. It was supposed to be five hundred thousand dollars to cover her humiliation during the trial. I expected Phillip would be found innocent—that was part of

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the deal, she couldn't be too convincing, that's why the physical evidence was so flimsy. I certainly did not expect that Phillip and his lawyers would settle. The studio wouldn't fund his next movie unless the case was over, so Miss Kellerman walked away with over ten million dollars. Not bad for a few weeks' work. Little Teddy, is it? Little Teddy is going to be set for life."

"Not necessarily," Daria said.

"What? She wants more? Is that what this is about?" Nicole shook her head. "I should have known. You're not with the *Times*. No paper would have given me a warning. They'd have just printed the story and watched us twist in the wind. You're working with Tammy. Well, if she thinks she's getting one more penny out of me or Phillip—"

"I think Tammy is dead, Mrs. Day."

Nicole abruptly closed her mouth. "What?"

In as few words as possible, Daria filled her in on Teddy's Afternoon in the Subway. She finished with, "The man I saw Tammy with, it was your chauffeur."

"Luc?" Nicole managed to make the one-syllable name sound like a two-part question. And yet she didn't seem too surprised.

"I'm certain of it. Do you think it's possible your husband might have sent him out to—"

"No!" Nicole shook her head emphatically. "No, Phillip wouldn't . . . That's not how he operates."

"Tammy Kellerman accused him, unjustly, of rape. She took ten million of his dollars. That's a pretty good motive for revenge."

"Phillip wouldn't do that. And he most certainly wouldn't send Luc. He doesn't like him. He doesn't trust him. Actually, the feeling is mutual. Luc worked for my family before he came to work for us. He's loyal to me, not Phillip. That's why I asked Luc to find a woman to set Phillip up. I thought he'd, well, enjoy—for lack of a better word—the assignment."

"So Luc knew Tammy."

"She was a friend of a friend of an acquaintance, that was my understanding."

"I'm going to need you to tell all this to the police," Daria said. "Honestly, I don't think Tammy is still alive, but on the off chance that she is, we have to let the police know everything."

Nicole stared at her, dumbfounded. "You cannot expect me to confess to—"

"You either confess that you asked Luc to hire Tammy Kellerman to frame your husband, or I take my paper trail to the police, and we'll see how long it takes them to jump to the same conclusion that I did, about who might have the best motive to kill Tammy. Your husband wiggled out of a rape trial relatively unscathed. You think he'll pull off the same feat with a murder trial?"

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The NYPD put out an arrest warrant for Luc Simonge while Daria and Nicole were still at the station waiting to sign their statements. At first, he denied even knowing Tammy Kellerman, claiming it was all a frame-up. However, a court-ordered peek into his bank accounts revealed that a few days after Tammy cashed her $500,000 windfall, she withdrew a $50,000 money order that somehow managed to end up in Luc's possession.

After that, Luc started screaming for a deal. He got the promise of a 15-to-25 rather than a life prison term, in exchange for revealing the location of Tammy's body and making a full confession.

"I got the little bitch the gig," he groused. "And she was fair with the fifty thou. Not too cheerful about it, but she gave up what she owed. Now, I figured I deserved a cut of the ten million bucks, too. She wouldn't have a penny of it, if not for me. You know how much ten percent of ten million bucks is? Enough so I can quit driving two spoiled brats to ballet lessons, that's for sure. She owed me. Fair is fair. Except soon as I came around asking for what's mine, she up and disappears. I looked all over Jersey for her. Practically all over the country. Got to admit, that was pretty ballsy of her, coming to New York. She told me: *Right under your own nose, Luc. I knew you wouldn't think to look there.* Well, you know what, Ms. Smart Ass? I found her anyway. Followed her and the kid, and I showed her what happens when I get double-crossed. You double-cross me, you pay. Make sure Mrs. Nicole Day hears all about that, will you?" ●

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Art by Mark Evans

ARIZONA HEAT

by Clark Howard

Tim Murray had covered the Paley murder case since the morning after it happened, first as a reporter for the *Bisbee Eagle,* later for the *Douglas Enterprise.* He was trying to work his way up to the *Phoenix Sun,* but so far his resume had been ignored. Now the Paley case was winding down. Horace Paley's killer, Stuart Percy, after eight years on Arizona's death row, was facing imminent execution; Percy's former lover, Jane Paley, the murdered man's wife, was beginning her ninth year of a life sentence at the women's prison. Murray thought that if he could break a last-minute story on the case, the Phoenix editors might take note of it and see something in his ability that had not surfaced in his resume. Make that resumes, plural.

So Murray put on a pair of swim trunks, took his clipboard with the yellow legal pad attached, a couple of ballpoint pens, and a thermos of Gatorade, and went out to the pool at the little apartment complex where he lived, and began to write . . .

ARIZONA HEAT
by Tim Murray

She was a young woman with a bitter past.

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He was a man looking for one more chance.

When they happened to meet . . . in the Arizona heat . . . something raw happened.

In the low desert of southeast Arizona, the company mining town of Lavender lay on the landscape like a series of tiny Monopoly houses around a great open pit mine that fed precious copper to teams of rugged, sun-browned, sweaty men who pulled the malleable, ductile metal out of the earth. The place was twenty-one miles from nowhere.

Fiction often draws from other interests in a writer's life. Clark Howard's choice of prisons as a setting derives in part from the knowledge he acquired doing prison interviews and research for his award-winning true-crime books. His other interests include professional boxing and jazz music, both of which provide fitting subjects for the hardboiled style of fiction for which he's known. ✝

To Lavender there came a man and a woman who met and for a time could not stay away from each other. They loved freely, fiercely, wantonly, like wild creatures. Then, after a time, they parted and went their separate ways.

The woman had once been married and had two children. She wanted a better life for them and for herself. So she married an older man, a mining superintendent, who gave her all of that—and had a big company life-insurance policy besides.

For a while, the woman's life was good. Then her lover showed up—down on his luck, as usual. He wanted his woman back—and he also wanted the money from her husband's life-insurance policy.

One night, as the woman's husband returned home from a late shift, two bullets were fired out of the darkness, and the man fell dead.

The police said the lover did it. The lover said the wife did it. The courts said they both did it.

Now the lover waits for the gas chamber, while the woman serves a life sentence in a sweltering desert prison.

There was never any doubt about the lover's guilt. But the evidence against her came from him.

Only he, by admitting that he lied, can save her before the gas chamber takes him to its long sleep.

And time is running out. . . .

The woman serving a life sentence in the Arizona women's prison had been known as Jane Fuller when she was fourteen years old and had walked into a high-school counselor's office in Lincoln, Nebraska, and said, "I need help. My twenty-four-year-old brother has been raping me since I was twelve. Him and his wife leave me every night to take care of their three kids while they go out drink-

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ing. Lately they've been bringing men home to have sex with me. My mom's dead and my dad's a drunk. I'm about ready to kill myself—"

That visit to the counselor's office was all it took. The teenager was taken into the protective custody of county authorities that very day and never had to return to her brother's home. Instead, after an investigation, county authorities made arrangements for Jane to go live with her sister, Betty, who was twenty-two and had run away from a life similar to Jane's several years earlier. Betty was married to a man named Kevin Lund, had two toddlers, and lived in a little company mining town in Arizona.

When Jane learned that Betty and her husband had agreed to take her in, she silently thought: *Thank God.* She knew that her sister's husband was a decent, churchgoing man, and that Betty had a good life—the kind of life Jane herself wanted someday: husband, children, home, respectability.

Before long, Jane Fuller was on a Greyhound bus traveling across country to a place in Arizona called Lavender.

The first time reporter Tim Murray interviewed Jane, after she had become the wife of Horace Paley, was when she was awaiting trial for his murder. Jane was twenty-four, two years younger than Murray himself. They spoke in the visiting room of the Geronimo County jail. The accused woman spoke of what life had been like for her when she first arrived at her new home in Lavender.

"I was like a square peg pounded into a round hole," she said. "Understand, I had been functioning almost as an adult for a couple of years by the time I got here. I mean, my older brother had been raping me since I was twelve. I had an ulcer by the time I was thirteen. I'd been taking care of his kids every night like a grown woman. I was sexually involved with grown men, a lot of them married—a couple of them fathers of kids I was in ninth grade with. I mean, I wasn't prepared to be an average teenager, you know?"

At that first interview, Tim Murray found Jane to be friendly, personable, attractive: She had curly, darkish-red hair over eyes the color of macadamia nuts, and a figure that was not blatantly voluptuous but nevertheless shapely enough to turn male heads for a second look. Tim, four years out of journalism school and going nowhere in his career, found himself uneasily drawn to her, not all that much physically but more so because of her candor, her easygoing openness with him. He had to keep reminding himself that there was a possibility that she either murdered or conspired with Stuart Percy to murder her own husband.

"Anyway," Jane continued, "needless to say, things didn't work out quite the way I'd've liked. My sister Betty and her husband were Jehovah's Witnesses. There were only three places I was allowed to be: school, church, and home. Talk about culture shock . . ."

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Jane had remained in the Lund home for two years, until she was old enough to quit school and go to work. Then she left and found a full-time job in a Tastee-Freez in the hamlet of Bisbee, two miles away. She boarded with a local family. It was not exactly a giant step forward in her life, but at least she was on her own, at least she had some *freedom*. Jane still wanted what her sister Betty had: a home and family of her own. But she wanted it to be a life somewhere in-between the sordid existence she had left back in Nebraska and the restrictive, often stifling world she had found with Jehovah's Witnesses.

Shortly after Jane's eighteenth birthday, a girl named Sissy Dornan, whom Jane had known in Lavender High before she quit school, came into the Tastee-Freez with her husband and new baby. Sissy had also left school, and married a young copper miner, had a baby, and was living in one of the company houses in Lavender. Sissy invited Jane to Sunday dinner and Jane accepted. It was there that she was introduced to Andy Tyler, a miner friend of the Dornans.

Andy was a big, strapping guy; he was, Jane thought, somebody a girl could lean on, depend on. He was close to thirty, but Jane didn't care. The important things were that he seemed good-natured, didn't smoke, drank nothing stronger than beer, and loved kids. Sometimes at the Dornan home, he would spend entire evenings after supper playing with Sissy's toddler on the floor.

Andy lived in a trailer near the mine pit.

Before long, Jane was living there, too.

"I'm two months late," Jane told Andy a few weeks before Christmas, when they had been living together for six months. "I guess I'm pregnant."

"Thought you was taking care of yourself," Andy said.

Jane shrugged. "I must have messed up."

"Want to get rid of it?" Andy asked.

Another shrug. "Not really." She looked away. "I haven't ever had anything of my own that was worth anything before. And, you know, I like kids. You do too." When she looked back at him, her eyes were teary. "I think it'd be nice to have a little baby."

Andy stared solemnly at her for a moment. Then he shrugged too. "Guess we ought to get married, then."

Nothing could have made Jane happier. At last her dream was going to start coming true.

They married on Christmas Eve and Andy got them into a little company house near the pit mine. Jane was sick almost every day of her pregnancy, but she didn't care; while the baby was growing inside her, she felt it was the purest, most precious time of her young life, and she believed that she was truly blessed. Andy was

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a wonderfully attentive husband. Every night Jane gave thanks in prayer for the life she had found.

That summer, a baby girl arrived after six hours of labor, all coached by Andy, who had gone to classes with Jane. It was one week before Jane's nineteenth birthday. They named the child Emily.

Jane breast-fed her infant. She and baby Emily were inseparable. Andy got less attention and was a little jealous. But his complaints seemed good-natured. Jane made it up to him by being special to him in bed. Nine months later, she was pregnant again.

The second pregnancy was much easier. "That was because Emily and I went through it together," Jane told Tim Murray in another interview. "I felt like it was Emily's baby, too, not just Andy's and mine."

The delivery was harder this time around, however; the doctor had to induce labor and it lasted nine hours, Andy again coaching her through every contraction. It was a baby boy this time, whom they named Edward. Jane had a tubal ligation; she was twenty years old, and felt she now had her dream family.

"I really enjoyed the early years of my marriage," Jane told Tim Murray. "I nursed both children for Edward's first nine months, then I weaned Emily and nursed only my son for two more years." She smiled shyly at the young reporter, whom she found quite handsome. "Andy bitched a lot because I was selfish with my, uh—ample breasts. But when you're nursing, you know, your nipples are sore a lot. And at night, in bed, I was too tired for sex a lot of the time."

Tim glanced at the accused woman's breasts several times. They were still ample. He felt a little embarrassed at Jane's candor.

"Andy began coming home late after work," she said. "He got in the habit of stopping off with some of the other miners at the Lavender Bar. And he started drinking Jack Daniels with his beer . . ."

It was when Andy began acting strange the following year that Jane discovered he had also taken up the habit of smoking marijuana. She complained about it, though not as vehemently, she realized later, as she should have. Her main concern was not what those new habits might be doing to Andy, only that he keep both his drinking and smoking out of the house, away from the children—which was fine with Andy. His young wife had made the not uncommon mistake of centering her life around their two children. Her husband slowly drifted away.

Jane did not realize the seriousness of the matter until a year later, when she found cocaine hidden in the house. Then she realized that Andy had become a full-blown addict. More and more alienated from his wife, he refused her offers of help, scoffed at suggestions of therapy, and shunned all her attempts to make up

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for the inattentiveness she now realized had created the problem.

Andy became unreachable. He came home only to sleep a few hours between midnight and dawn, and virtually ignored the children. The money he gave Jane to run the house began to get tight. When she could, Jane took care of other children in her home to make ends meet; when she had to, she borrowed money from her sister.

Christmas that year was the event that ended the marriage. Toys for the children and a few family gifts had been put on layaway in a Bisbee department store, and money was being saved for them. However, when it came time to pick them up, a few days before Christmas, the money was gone. Andy had blown it on a holiday dope binge. For Jane, depriving her kids of Santa Claus was the ultimate offense. Shortly after the first of the new year, she took the children and left.

Jane moved back in with her sister's family. Over the next few months, Andy begged her to come back. He entered a program to kick his cocaine habit, and swore to her that he would stay clean when he did. But Jane rejected his pleading.

"I don't trust him anymore," she told Betty. "He's weak. I don't think he'll ever be a good provider again. Drinking and drugs will always be out there, tempting him. I can't take the chance that he'll choose them over Emily and Edward. My kids are everything to me."

Jane determined to find someone else to be a daddy to her kids. She started looking for her dream all over again.

Horace Paley was a forty-one-year-old man, never married, who worked as a shift superintendent at the pit mine. Jane had met him years earlier through her brother-in-law, Betty's husband, and known him casually when she first arrived to live with her sister. Unknown to Jane, Horace Paley had always been attracted to her, but kept his distance because at the time she was still a minor. But when Horace learned that Jane had left Andy Tyler and filed for divorce, he began, as Jane said in a later interview, "paying attention to me.

"We'd run into each other here and there, on the street or in a store, and just stand and talk, you know, like people do in a little community. Eventually he started calling me on the phone at Betty's, where I'd moved with my kids to get away from Andy. It was obvious that he liked me a lot. When I finally got Betty and Kevin to let me invite him around, my kids took to him right away. I mean, they were *crazy* about him. He'd pay attention to them, always brought them little gifts of some kind, played with them. That was very important, because my kids were everything to me."

While her divorce was pending, Jane and Horace began seeing each other regularly. It became clear to Jane that Horace was seri-

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ously courting her. They went to dinner, to dances at the company recreation building, to movies, and, eventually, to bed in Horace's little company house.

Sex with Horace, Jane found, was not much different than sex with Andy had been. Jane enjoyed pleasing him, but like all the sex she had ever known, beginning with her brother Jack, she derived no personal satisfaction from it, no intense passion, no orgasms. With Horace, it was just a way to get a new, better daddy for Emily and Edward. When her divorce was final, she planned to reestablish her modest little dream life with a new husband.

But, like a lot of Jane's plans, it was not to be that easy.

While she was waiting for her divorce to be finalized, Jane put Emily and Edward in a day-care facility and found a job as a nursing assistant in the Vista Valley Convalescent Center for the elderly in Bisbee, two miles away.

"It was my first real job," she boasted to Tim Murray. "I didn't count slinging ice cream at Tastee-Freez; that wasn't a *job,* it was just work. But as soon as I started at Vista Valley, I somehow felt naturally suited for the work. I seemed to have a genuine knack for taking care of old folks. I loved it, I really did, and I loved them. I even started thinking seriously about studying to be a real nurse after Horace and I got settled."

Shortly after starting at Vista Valley, a handsome, polished man, about ten years her senior, wearing a white physician's coat, introduced himself as Dr. Stuart Percy. He was charming, very friendly, and after a while began instructing her in more efficient ways to take care of her patients. Jane was immediately attracted to him, almost with a physical urgency. His smooth self-confidence, easy smile, even the way he smelled when she stood close to him, aroused feelings in her that she had never before experienced. Several times, she caught him looking at her while she was working, and sensed that there was also something stirring in him.

It was summer, Arizona heat seeping into every crack and corner despite air conditioning; a time when an extra blouse or shirt button might be opened, when a line of perspiration would settle on a person's upper lip, when bodies felt the need for some kind of *release*—from clothing, restraints, inhibitions. Jane and Stuart were being moved by that Arizona heat—and they both knew it. They were drawn to each other by a demanding passion that neither was able to resist.

The first time they made love was, for Jane, like a scene from an erotic movie. The heat that day had been dispelled for an hour by one of the typical violent summer thunderstorms that sometimes assaulted the desert. A driving rain was pelting the convalescent home when Stuart walked up, took Jane's hand, and led her into an unoccupied room.

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"We should be calming the patients," she said, drawing back.

"You and I need calming more than the patients do," he told her, and braced the closed door with a chair.

In seconds, he had her white uniform and his own clothes off, and they were doing things to each other as naturally and easily as if they had been doing them for years. Looking back, Jane would say, "It was the most perfect lovemaking I can imagine two people ever having. It was like being naked in Heaven and making love on a cloud. I must have had a dozen orgasms, almost nonstop, like a line of speeding cars on a highway. I'll probably be thinking about that the moment I die."

I wonder if Stuart Percy will, too, Tim Murray asked himself, thinking of the man waiting to die in the gas chamber.

Nearly every day after that first time, Jane and Stuart wallowed in each other's lust, when and where they could, both of them professing the greatest love they had ever felt.

"I want to take you and run away from here," Stuart said to her one day in the third week of their intimacy.

"Run away from what?" It was her first uneasy moment with him.

"Look, I have a wife, Jane. Her name is Corinne. And I have a little boy named Carlton." Seeing the surprised expression on her face, he said, "Why are you looking at me like that? You're married too, and you have a little boy and a little girl."

"Sure, but I'm getting a divorce," Jane reasoned.

"I will, too. Let's go away together; let's make a new life."

"What about my kids?" That was Jane's gauntlet. She loved this man fiercely, but she was not about to trade her children for him.

"We'll take them with us," Stuart replied at once, passing the ultimate test.

"What about your son?" Jane asked guiltily.

"I can make some kind of arrangement about Carlton after we get settled." He took her in his arms. "Where do you want to go? I've lived in Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Florida, even up in Maine for a while—"

"I've never been anywhere except Nebraska, besides here," she said, feeling less than worldly.

"Did you like Nebraska?"

"I liked the place—I didn't like my life—"

"Your life is going to be different now. Let's start with Nebraska. If we don't like it, we can move on."

A fully realized woman, really in love for the first time, Jane agreed to run away with Stuart Percy. She was elated at the prospect. She would have her kids, a husband she was wild about, and the beginning of a new life. Thoughts of Horace Paley were simply put out of her mind. Once again, she seemed to have a future that was bright.

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As usual in Jane's life, the brightness soon dimmed.

On the long drive toward Nebraska, somewhere in Colorado, Jane casually asked, "Where did you go to school to become a doctor?"

Stuart looked at her incredulously.

"I'm not a doctor, Jane. I thought you knew. I was just trying to impress you when I said that. I was a nursing assistant, just like you."

Jane was stunned; further, she was deeply embarrassed because Stuart seemed to think it was her own fault for not knowing. She became chagrined when he spoke again.

"Do you really love me, Jane, or do you just love the thought of being a doctor's wife?"

Made vulnerable by this shocking turn of events, Jane swore that she truly loved him. She swore that it did not matter what he was.

Her surprises, however, were just beginning. The next blow came the following day.

"How about we detour east to Kansas?" he said. "There's somebody I'd like you to meet."

"Oh? Who?" She thought at first it might be his parents. No such luck.

"Well, I didn't tell you before because I was afraid of upsetting you. Corinne isn't my first wife. I was married before, to a woman named Esther. We have three kids. Stuart, Jr., is nine, and Irene is seven. My five-year-old's name is Edward, same as your boy. Isn't that funny?"

Yeah, it's a scream, Jane thought. *God, what next?*

In Salina, Kansas, Jane and Stuart stayed for two weeks with Esther and the three children. They lived in a tacky little house and subsisted on state welfare. Stuart's children were crazy about Jane's two little ones, and Esther seemed to be a kind and understanding person. All of which made the visit at least tolerable for Jane.

When Stuart was not around, Esther told Jane of the nomadic life she had led with Stuart, moving from San Francisco, where they met and married, to Wisconsin, then Florida, Maine, Kansas.

"Like we were gypsies. Finally the kids and I stopped. We'd had enough. He just kept on going. I lost him."

At night, after relentless sex with Stuart, during which Jane did not care about anything except the orgasms he brought to her, she would lie in the darkness and wonder how the other women, Corinne and Esther, felt; thinking how awful it would be, after finding Stuart, to lose him. The thought, Jane later told Tim Murray, gave her chills and made her cling fearfully to his naked, sleeping body.

She vowed never to lose him, whatever it took.

Before they left, Jane thanked Esther for her hospitality. "I really

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didn't know what to expect before I got here," she confessed. "I had no idea Stuart had a first wife and children this old."

"Oh, I'm not his first wife," Esther said with a sly smile. "He was married to a woman named Charlotte before me. He's got a boy fourteen by her. I think they live somewhere in Oregon." She gripped Jane's arm. "Please don't tell Stuart I told you. Not until you're a few hundred miles away, anyhow."

Jane decided not to mention it at all. "I mean, what the hell," she said later, "what was one more wife and another kid coming out of the woodwork?"

If he left all those women behind—Charlotte, Esther, Corinne, and who knew who else—Jane reasoned that there must have been something lacking in the relationship. She chose to think that the something was love: powerful love, *real* love—the kind she and Stuart had together.

She was determined to make a life with this true love of hers, whatever it took, whatever baggage of his she had to accept and overlook. The modest dream she had pictured for herself throughout the years was still obtainable—and it would be better than ever, because she would be sharing it with Stuart.

"I just had to chase my dream a little longer," she recalled deciding. "But I was determined to do it."

When they finally got to Lincoln, Nebraska, and found a place to live, Jane put her children in a day-care facility again, and she and Stuart both got jobs at Albermar Adult Care Home, as nursing assistants.

Within a month, because of her efficiency and dedication, Jane was promoted and put in charge of her own section of rooms and patients—and Stuart was working for her. It was a situation that bothered Stuart.

The two of them got along very well in their off hours, acting much like newlyweds freshly in love. But during working hours, tension started to build between them, particularly when Jane instructed Stuart to do something, or when she felt it necessary to criticize his sloppy work.

"I taught you how, boss lady, remember?" he would say sarcastically. And Jane would back off and do the work right herself.

"After three months," Jane recalled, "of being together morning, noon, and night, hardly ever being out of each other's sight—eating, sleeping, living, and working together—Stuart developed kind of an edge. At home he would brood and complain about my two noisy children and the lack of money to go out in the evening. At work I noticed that he was becoming verbally abusive and sometimes physically aggressive with some of our patients. I tried to handle it without offending him. One day I kidded him by saying, 'If I didn't love you, honey, I think I'd fire you.'"

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"Go ahead, do it," Stuart challenged. It was clear from his tone that he meant it. Jane tried to laugh it off, but he wouldn't let her. "If you don't have the nerve to fire me, then I quit!"

Tossing his smock onto her desk, he walked out.

When Jane got home after work, Stuart was packed and ready to leave. "I'm going to try California again," he said. "Want to come?"

"Stuart, please don't do this," Jane pleaded. "We've started a new life here—"

"I'm tired of the new life, and I'm going to California," he repeated emphatically. "You want to come or not?"

"What happens when you get tired of California?" she asked. "Do we hit the road to Florida or Maine or wherever, like you did with Esther? Or do you leave me behind like you did Corinne in Arizona? And like you probably did Charlotte in Oregon?"

It was the first time she'd ever mentioned that she knew about Charlotte.

Stuart stared coldly at her for a moment, as if she had committed an unpardonable sin. Then he picked up his suitcase and left.

Three days later, Jane called Horace Paley and he sent three plane tickets for her and the children to fly back to Arizona. Horace met them at the airport in Phoenix. Back in the company mining town of Lavender, Jane and her children moved into Horace's little house at the edge of the pit mine.

The following month, Jane picked up her final divorce papers ending her marriage to Andy Tyler. That weekend, she and Horace drove up to Laughlin, Nevada, and were married.

Once again, Jane began her dream life: husband, kids, little house, respectability.

It lasted all of three months.

The soft knock at the back door came one night an hour after Jane had put the children to bed. When she opened the door, she almost fainted. It was Stuart.

"How's married life?" he asked casually.

"What—what are you doing here?" It was impossible to conceal her shock. "I thought you were in California."

"I couldn't stay away from you," he replied, touching her cheek with his fingertips. "Can I come in?"

"No—you'd better not. Horace—my husband—will be home any minute—"

"No, he won't, Jane. He's working the late shift at the mine. He won't be home for three hours."

Stuart slowly eased past her into the kitchen, letting his body drag along hers as he moved. . . .

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Thinking back on the moment, Jane recalled to Tim Murray that Stuart's presence, his touch, had turned her on. "I couldn't help it," she admitted. "Stuart had that effect on me. The look in his eyes, the sound of his voice, the way he dragged himself against me like that. I couldn't resist him; I'd never been able to resist him. He knew it. I barely had time to turn off the kitchen light before he had me on the floor. . . ."

He had left her there on the kitchen floor an hour later. Then he called her the next day, a little while after Horace left for work.

"Stuart, please leave me alone," she begged.

"I want to come over in a little while. After it gets dark."

"Stuart, no, you can't! I'm married now! If Horace found out about last night—"

"He *will* find out," Stuart said evenly, "unless you let me come over tonight."

"You wouldn't tell him, Stuart, you wouldn't do that to me—"

"I love you, Jane. I'd do anything to have you. And you want me, too. You know you do."

"Stuart, don't do this to me, *please!* Let me make a life for myself and my kids—"

"Tonight, Jane. Leave the back door unlocked."

He hung up.

So it started all over again. Jane maintained in her interviews with Tim Murray that there was nothing she could do about it; she was terrified that Horace would find out. At the same time, she did not deny experiencing the same body-shuddering multiple orgasms that Stuart had always given her. Before he got to her house, when he was on the phone, she invariably pleaded with him to stay away, and when their sweating, grinding sex was over, she implored him not to come back. But during the act itself, she hoped it would never end. She claimed in retrospect that the situation was driving her toward a nervous breakdown.

When Stuart started talking about Horace's company life insurance, Jane did not take him seriously. She knew quite well by then that *Doctor* Stuart Percy talked a very good game, but he never followed through. Stuart was a dreamer, a wisher, a planner; he had never been a *doer.* Even when he outlined a plan to kill Horace one night, Jane dismissed it.

"In my wildest imagination, I never thought Stuart could—or would—commit murder," she later swore to Tim Murray. "It would have been like believing he could stop telling lies, stop using women the way he did. Basically, Stuart was a coward. Even after all this time, with him on Death Row, it's still hard for me to believe it happened."

But happen it did.

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One night, Horace Paley returned home after working the three-to-eleven shift at the Lavender Mine and was fatally shot two times outside his carport. He died within an hour.

One week later, Stuart Percy was arrested at the Cochise Motel in Phoenix, where he was working as a relief desk clerk. Someone who recognized him had seen him running from the scene after the shooting. When he was found in Phoenix, he still had the murder weapon in his car. He was taken back to Geronimo County and charged with first-degree murder.

Stuart's story was that Jane had fired the fatal shots.

"I was there," he admitted at his trial four months later. "Jane and I had been making love and lost track of the time. Before we knew it, Horace was driving up. Jane got angry at us being interrupted. She'd been trying for weeks to get me to kill Horace for his insurance money. When she heard him come home, she said she'd had enough of him and was going to get rid of him herself, once and for all. She ran outside and shot him twice. I took the gun away from her and got the hell out of there. I figured she could say some burglar had done it or something—"

When Jane testified at the trial, she admitted that she and Stuart had been having an affair, but stated that on the night of the killing she was inside the house with her children, all of them asleep, and that she had never at any time asked Stuart to kill her husband or been part of any plan for him to do it.

There had been no fingerprints on the gun; Stuart had wiped it clean. Then he had carelessly left it in his car, believing that no one would suspect him.

The jury found Stuart Percy guilty of murder in the first degree. He was sentenced to death in the gas chamber.

Stuart Percy's story about Jane trying to get him to murder her husband did not go away after his conviction. He had told his wife, Corinne, to whom he was still married, as well as several other people in the area, that Jane wanted him to kill Horace Paley for her. And Jane had admitted at the trial that in addition to having an affair with Percy, she had also given him two hundred dollars out of her household money when he told her that his car was about to be repossessed. Investigators learned that shortly after Jane gave him the money, he used it to buy the murder weapon at a pawnshop in Tucson.

Circumstantial evidence began to pile up. Even though Stuart's story of Jane herself doing the shooting was disbelieved, a conspiracy theory, in light of her adulterous behavior, became strong enough for her to be indicted.

Jane was arrested, pled not guilty, and eventually faced a jury trial. Like Stuart, she was found guilty. The circumstantial evidence,

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as well as her history with Stuart and her own admission of the recent affair, and her giving Stuart the money he used to buy the gun, convinced the jury that she had, in fact, conspired with Stuart Percy to kill Horace and collect his life insurance. Like Stuart, Jane could have received the death penalty—but in her case, as a mother of two little children, mercy was shown. She was sentenced to life in prison, and required to serve a mandatory fifty years of that term.

"All I ever wanted," Jane told Tim Murray in an interview after her conviction, "was a decent husband, a nice little house to raise my kids in, and respectability. I thought I'd found it with Andy, but he turned into a junkie. I know that was partly my fault; hell, maybe it was *all* my fault for making my kids more important than my husband.

"But the biggest mistake I made was taking the job at Vista Valley, because that's where I met Stuart. As far as the men in my life are concerned, Stuart was the best and the worst thing that ever happened to me. I still have very intense feelings for him even now. Half the time those feelings are hatred, but the other half they're love. He was the only man I ever loved completely—body, mind, heart, soul, spirit. I love him for making me a whole woman, for keeping me from going through life without ever being physically fulfilled. But I hate him with all my heart for killing Horace, because Horace was such a good and kind man. And I hate him most of all because he cost me my kids. My little Emily and my little Edward. I'll never be a mother to them again. That's the worst part of everything that's happened to me . . ."

Tim Murray spent an hour with Jane on the morning she was taken to prison. By now they had become familiar and comfortable with each other. They were, oddly, almost like old friends.

"How are the kids doing?" Tim asked.

"Good. Thank God for my sister Betty and her husband for taking them in. They've moved back to Nebraska; the scandal in Lavender was too much for them. Kevin's got a good job servicing farm equipment." She shrugged. "I guess my kids will grow up to be Jehovah's Witnesses, but what the hell. It's a lot better than the way I grew up." Sighing, Jane changed the subject. "What about you, Tim? What are you going to do now that you don't have me to write about anymore?"

"I don't know," he said, grunting softly. "I made it from the *Bisbee Eagle* to the *Douglas Enterprise.* Maybe that's as far as I'll ever get. Small-town reporter on a small-town newspaper."

"No," Jane said, shaking her head, "you'll make it to the big time one of these days, wait and see. And you'll meet a nice young lady, get married, have kids, a home, respectability . . ." Her voice faded off to silence. That was *her* life she was wishing for him.

Now Tim was the one to shake his head. "No, I'll probably stay a

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bachelor until I'm old and gray."

"Someone will come along," she promised.

For just a moment, a split instant, their eyes locked and something passed between them; something that had been barely buoyant in each of their minds for a long time now, but which each of them had dismissed out of hand as being frivolous. It was a brief thought of what might have been. . . .

"Can I write to you, Tim?" she asked when it came time for her to go.

"If you want to."

Tilting her head slightly, Jane said, "You've never asked me if I really did plan with Stuart to kill Horace, have you?"

"No, I've never asked you that."

"Do you want to ask me now?"

"No."

A little while later, Tim stood outside the Geronimo County jail as Jane was escorted—handcuffed, belly-chained, and ankle-shackled —to a transport van to be taken to prison.

Tim Murray job-jumped for a few years, but always laterally, never upwardly. He worked for the *Benson Banner,* the *Nogales Press,* even spent some time up north on the *Flagstaff Sentinel.*

Jane wrote him, at first every week, then twice a month, finally monthly or less frequently. She really had little to correspond about. Her days were maddeningly uniform, like reading the same book over and over again. The women's prison sat on the scorching Sonora Desert just north of the Mexican border. She worked in the sweltering, steaming prison laundry. The only happy aspect of her life was that when Emily and Edward were old enough, Jane's sister Betty encouraged them to begin writing to their mother. She loved getting childish letters from them.

But even that happiness carried heartbreak with it.

At the men's prison near Florence, Stuart Percy sat on Death Row, watching time go by as one appeal of his sentence after another was turned down. Slowly but with a methodic, maddening sureness, the state and federal appellate appeals process moved him closer and closer to the gas chamber.

Stuart was a surly, irksome inmate, disliked by other prisoners as well as staff. He grew more and more unpleasant as each year one or two or three men on the Row went to their deaths, and for him time moved inexorably on.

In the women's prison, Jane's cellmate was an older woman named Belle, doing life for killing her boyfriend and a woman with whom he had been cheating on her.

Jane talked constantly to Belle about finding some way to con-

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vince Stuart Percy to recant his story that she had been part of a plan to murder her husband.

"If only he would admit that he had lied at his own trial, they would have to give me a new trial, or commute my sentence, or *something*. Wouldn't they, Belle?"

"Seems likely," the older woman said. "But you never know, kid," she qualified her statement. Belle was in her twenty-third year in prison. She was nothing if not jaded.

"If I could only get in touch with him." Jane would pace the cell or the yard or the rec room, wringing her hands. "If I could only talk to him. He loved me, Belle, I know he did. Maybe he would listen to reason and help me."

"I wouldn't count on it, honey."

"He might do it for my kids. He liked my kids." Pausing a beat, she added quietly, "Some of the time, anyway."

But there was no way for Jane to contact Stuart. "It's impossible," her prison counselor told her. "There's absolutely no way for you to do it. It's strictly against Department of Corrections policy for an inmate in any prison facility to correspond or otherwise communicate with anyone on Death Row. Look, why don't you have your lawyer talk to his lawyer?"

"I don't have a lawyer anymore. My appeals have run out and the state won't appoint any other lawyers to represent me. And I don't have any money to pay for a lawyer myself."

"Well, I'm sorry, Jane, but there's nothing I can do for you."

In desperation, Jane wrote to Tim Murray and asked if he would come visit her. Tim was now the editor of the *Dos Cabezos Weekly* in the little town of Willcox. He was still a bachelor, still dreaming of a job with a big-time newspaper in a big-time town. He and Jane had not seen each other for eight years, and their exchange of letters had, over time, become infrequent.

At first sight of her in the visiting room, Tim was shocked. Only thirty-two, Jane looked ten years older. The expression on his face told Jane exactly what he was thinking.

"Yeah, I know," she said. "It happens to all of us in here. Too much starchy food. Not enough exercise. Too many cigarettes. No sex—or at least none to speak of." She forced a half smile. "But you look good, Tim. An editor now, huh?"

"Yeah. Of a *weekly*. Twelve pages of ads, local gossip, and front-page stories about Indians getting in fights at the Friday-night American Legion baseball games. I go home every night, drink gin, and wish I had all that journalism school tuition back."

Studying Jane, Tim could not help wondering how much better she would have looked if she and he had met under different circumstances . . .

"Why did you ask me to come see you, Jane?"

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"Can you get in to visit Stuart on the Row?"

"Probably. But why would I want to?"

"To read a letter to him. From me." Before Tim could respond in any way, Jane leaned forward urgently. "Look, the only chance I have of ever getting out of here is if Stuart retracts his testimony and I get a commutation, or maybe a retrial based on new evidence—"

"Jane, Jane," he cut in. "Do you seriously think there's even a remote possibility that Stuart would do that? He's been protesting his innocence for eight years. Do you think he's going to admit to the world now that he's guilty?"

"He might, Tim. He *might.* The closer he gets to the gas chamber, the more he might consider doing the right thing for a change—"

"You're kidding yourself, Jane."

"It's a *chance,* Tim—"

"Why do this to yourself? Why build your hopes up when all it's going to get you is a big letdown?"

Sitting back in her chair, Jane fixed him with a flat, unblinking stare. "I've been in this hellhole for eight years, Tim. I have to serve forty-two more to even be considered for parole. *Forty-two* more years, Tim. I'll be seventy-four years old. My kids will be middle-aged. I'll probably be a grandmother. If there's even a one-in-a-*million* chance, don't you think it's worth me taking it?"

Tim contemplated her position. And the woman herself. The once-pretty, darkish red hair was no longer curly, but combed straight back now with no style to it; the brightness of her macadamia eyes had faded to dullness; her complexion had coarsened; her shapely figure was tending toward thickness. It hurt his heart to see her that way. But the last thing in the world he wanted to do was enhance any remote hope she had of being released from prison. That would only cause anguish for her—and for him.

Yet in the end he found himself incapable of refusing to help her. He could not look into her pleading eyes and say no.

"What would you say to Stuart in the letter?"

Jane brightened at once. "I'm not sure. I mean, I know what I'm going to say but I don't know how I'm going to say it. I need to think about it."

"Well, don't think too long," Tim said. "The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review Stuart's case this morning. I heard it on the radio driving down here. That was the last of his appeals. The state will set an execution date now. He's probably got less than thirty days left."

Jane turned somber. "You'll help me, then, Tim."

"Yes. Any way I can."

When he left the women's prison that day, he felt as if he had just driven a nail into Jane's heart.

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The letter to Stuart came in an envelope addressed to Tim Murray. It read:

> Dear Stuart,
> I am writing to beg you to help me. If you ever truly cared for me, please—please—try to find it in your heart to tell the truth about what happened. There is nothing I can do to help you, Stuart, but if there was, I think you know I would do it. You are the only man I ever truly loved; please don't let me rot in prison because of it. . . .

The letter went on to explain how Jane felt that if Stuart would retract his trial testimony and issue a statement that she did not conspire with him to kill her husband, it would mean at least a retrial for her, perhaps even a commutation of her sentence.

Tim went to the prison that housed Death Row and used his newspaper credentials to ask for an interview. Prison policy was to allow media representatives access to condemned inmates if the prisoner consented to it.

The Death Row visiting room was divided down the middle by a counter with an eighty-gauge steel wire grille that extended from the countertop to the ceiling. The condemned inmate sat on one side of the counter and grille, the visitor on the other. Stuart Percy was brought in on his side dressed in a white jumpsuit, wrists handcuffed to a belly chain. Pale, haggard-looking, head shaved because of the heat, he stared at Tim through the tight-gauged grille.

"You the same guy that wrote all those stories about Jane eight years ago?" he asked.

"I'm the one," Tim said.

"How come you never wrote any stories about me?"

"Because nobody cared about you. A lot of people were sympathetic to Jane."

"So what do you want to talk to me now for?"

"Jane asked me to come. She wrote you a letter. She asked me to read it to you."

"Is it a love letter?" Stuart asked smugly, almost with a leer.

Tim shrugged. "Partly, I guess. You decide."

Taking the letter from his pocket, Tim unfolded it and slowly, quietly, read Jane's pleading words. Stuart's expression did not change. After watching Tim put the letter away, he merely stood and smiled.

"Thanks for dropping in. Tell Jane I said hello."

"You won't even consider helping her?"

"Look," the condemned man responded with an edge, "right now I'm not interested in helping anybody but myself. I've got one more shot at beating the gas chamber. That shot is a petition to the governor for clemency, to commute my death sentence to life in

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prison. The appeals lawyer appointed to my case by the state tells me I've got a pretty good chance. There's a big anti-death-penalty movement all over the country right now—"

"You're dreaming, Percy," Tim cut in flatly. "This is an election year. The governor's not going to grant clemency to a cold-blooded killer like you."

"What makes you so sure I *am* a cold-blooded killer?" Stuart asked bluntly. "No fingerprints on the gun, remember? All my lawyer has to do is convince the governor that there's a fifty-fifty chance that *Jane* pulled the trigger, not me. So why shouldn't he be fair and give us both the same sentence?"

Tim stared at the condemned man. Mixed scenarios and wild thoughts bombarded his mind. Was it possible that—?

No, that was unthinkable.

Turning his back on Stuart Percy, Tim walked out of the visitors' room. Outside in the parking lot, he sat in his car with both hands gripping the steering wheel, staring at the haze of Arizona heat that the blazing afternoon sun drew up from the flat Pinal desert. He would not believe that Jane was a murderer; he *could* not believe it. Nor did he believe that she was in any way involved in a conspiracy to kill Horace Paley. For one thing, he reasoned with himself, she loved her kids too much to become involved in anything that might remotely cause her to lose them. And for another thing—

Well, he just didn't believe it, that was all.

As he drove away toward the highway, he swore to himself that somehow, some *way,* he was going to get Jane out of prison.

During ten years of bouncing around from one small Arizona newspaper to another, Tim Murray had built up a network of friends and acquaintances at various levels of state and local government. One person with whom he had periodic amiable encounters, and whom he had watched move up the ladder of responsible jobs at the state house, was a young man his own age named Danny Lopez, who was currently serving as press secretary to the governor. Tim invited Lopez to lunch in Phoenix.

"I've got an idea for you, my friend," he told Lopez. "It's something your boss might like, and if he does you can take full credit for it."

"And what do you get, Timmy?" the press secretary asked.

"An eight-hour lead on breaking the story."

"Last time I heard, pal, you were working for a *weekly.*"

"I won't break the story in my paper. I'll break it on one of the wire services. And I'll get a byline that'll go out all over the country."

"Still shooting for the big time, huh? Okay, what's the story?"

"This is an election year for your boss. There's a strong anti-capital-punishment movement in the state that could cost him some critical votes. Are you familiar with the Stuart Percy case?"

"Yeah. We just got an application for clemency on him. The trial

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judge has already set an execution date. I hope this idea of yours doesn't involve commuting this guy. Because if it does—"

"Wait, Danny, don't get negative on me before I finish. You know about Jane Paley, who was convicted in the same case?"

"Yeah. Her appeals have run out."

"Right. But she thinks she can convince Stuart Percy to recant his testimony against her if she can speak with him face-to-face. Think about the press coverage your boss would get if he allowed an unprecedented visit between the two of them to allow Jane Paley to plead her case. Jane has two kids. The public would eat this up, Danny. The anti-death-penalty crowd, too; giving a condemned killer a chance to make some kind of retribution for what he's done by helping to release an innocent convicted woman from prison—"

"I don't know," Lopez said, shaking his head. "It's going to look like a ploy to get his own sentence commuted."

"Not to the anti-death-penalty crowd. To them it's going to show the world that even a condemned killer has some humanity in him. And if Percy does recant his testimony and get a mother of two released, it may make him some kind of hero and your boss might even consider it politically advisable to commute *him*. But whether he goes that far or not, Danny, it's a win-win situation for him." Tim paused a beat, then added, "It's the kind of story that could help get a governor into the U.S. Senate in a few years."

Danny Lopez pursed his lips in thought and began drumming his fingers spiritedly on the table.

Bingo, Tim thought.

One week later, after two more meetings with Danny Lopez to clarify a few incidental matters, Tim Murray was back in the Death Row visiting room facing Stuart Percy.

"I've got a deal for you, Percy. It might—and I'm emphasizing *might*—just save your life."

He told the condemned man about the meeting that could be arranged between him and Jane Paley, the publicity it would no doubt generate, and the sympathy it could conjure up for him if he aided Jane in securing either a new trial or a commutation of her sentence.

Percy shook his head irritably. "I already told you: I've got my own executive-clemency petition pending before the governor."

"Not anymore, you haven't," Tim told him evenly. "Your petition will be denied at the governor's weekly press conference today."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Doesn't matter how I know it. Point is, you've got a date with the gas chamber in two weeks. Your only hope is a last-minute reprieve by the governor—*after* you meet with Jane, and *if* you retract your testimony about her."

Percy angrily got to his feet. "I don't know what kind of scam

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you're trying to pull on me, Murray, but it's not going to work!" His eyes narrowed. "You've got something going with Jane, haven't you? You're hot for her, aren't you? You want her out for yourself! Well, you can go to hell, Mr. Reporter! I'm not falling for it!"

Tim rose to leave. "It's up to you. Enjoy your last few days."

Just then, a corrections officer entered the room on the inmate's side. "Percy," he called, "the governor denied your clemency petition. It just came over the noon news." The officer then left.

Tim was standing at the exit door, waiting.

Stuart Percy sat back down and buried his face in his hands. After several moments, he looked over at Tim.

"Okay. What do I have to do?"

Bingo, Tim thought again.

The story, written by Tim at poolside that afternoon, went out on one of the wire services the next day. Broadcast news picked it up at once.

"In a copyrighted story by reporter Timothy Murray, National News Service has reported that Arizona governor Neal Harris has approved an unprecedented meeting between a condemned man facing the gas chamber in less than two weeks and his former lover, both of whom were convicted of the murder eight years ago of the woman's husband. . . ."

Courthouse News anchor Gracie Nance interrupted regularly scheduled programming with a half-hour special report. "Arizona governor Neal Harris today gave permission for an extraordinary face-to-face meeting between condemned killer Stuart Percy and his former lover, Jane Paley, widow of the man Percy was sentenced to death for killing, ostensibly to collect the victim's life insurance. Paley, a mother of two who is serving a life sentence in prison for her part in the same crime, has long maintained that her ex-lover Percy could prove her innocence. Now, with Percy very close to his execution date, with no further appeals left, she will have the opportunity to personally plead with him to do so. . . ."

On the day of their meeting, Jane was brought handcuffed and shackled to the men's prison by an escort of Arizona State Rangers. The warden and a team of corrections officers took her to the Death Row visitors' room, which had been reserved for the occasion. Stuart was brought in on the inmate side. The two could be observed but not heard by prison staff. They were left completely alone. No media or cameras were allowed inside the prison during the meeting.

Jane and Stuart spent a minute just staring at each other through the wire grille. It had been nearly ten years since each had last seen the other. Jane's eyes teared up and she briefly bit her lower lip at the memory of the love she had once felt for the man facing her. Stuart, on the other hand, was reserved and early on displayed the attitude that it was Jane's fault that he was

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where he was. The preliminary dialogue between them was strained. Jane tried desperately to convince Stuart to support her innocence. She begged and pleaded. But Stuart could not get past the fact that he was going to die, while Jane would go on living.

"You know what happened that night as well as I do, Jane," he accused. "You didn't want to spend the rest of your life with a man twice your age, a man who could never, *ever,* make you feel the way I made you feel. You said yourself a hundred times that you'd never even had an orgasm with any other man! This isn't *fair,* Jane—you go free and I have to die!"

Stuart dismissed out of hand Jane's assertion that there was nothing she could do about his situation, only something that he could do about hers.

"Not true." He shook his head vehemently. "You could tell them that *you* pulled the trigger that night, Jane. Then I could be commuted and we could both go on living."

The thirty minutes that they had been allowed together went by before either of them realized it, and guards came to take Jane away. "Stuart, please!" she screamed as she was hustled toward the door. "Please—for my kids, Stuart—please—!"

Then it was over.

Outside, she was hurried through a phalanx of media people, all seeming to ask variations of the same question: "Jane, do you think Stuart will help you?"

She could only shake her head helplessly. "I don't know—I don't know—"

Back in her cell at the women's prison, Belle asked, "What do you think, honey?"

Jane, wasted from her frantic, emotional pleading, lit a cigarette and shook her head despondently.

"I think you and Tim have been right all along. Stuart is going to be a world-class, low-life bastard all the way to the gas chamber."

Tim Murray, however, was not of the same mind. He continued to carry out his plan. Two days after Jane's visit, Tim himself went to see Percy again.

"I had breakfast with my friend, the governor's press secretary, this morning, Stuart. He told me, strictly off the record, that the governor is going to seriously consider a last-minute reprieve for you—depending on how you respond to Jane's pleas, and what the public opinion polls show."

"Why the hell should I believe that?" Stuart asked with a sneer.

Tim shrugged. "Why *not* believe it? What do I have to gain by lying to you?"

"I know why you're doing this, Murray. You're doing it to help *her.*"

"I'm doing it to help myself," Tim asserted. "I'm doing it for the *story.* This is going to make me a big-time reporter. Look, Stuart,

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here's how it works. You tip me in advance when you're going to hold a press conference to declare Jane's innocence. You let me break the story first on a wire service. The governor's press secretary has agreed to do the same when the governor grants you a last-minute reprieve; I break that story first, too. After that, I can write my own ticket. It's a no-lose situation, Stuart. Everybody wins. I get my big-time job. Jane goes free. And you beat the gas chamber."

"How do I know the governor will come through?"

"He'll come through," Tim assured him. "Look, right now it's a national news story. After you clear Jane, it'll be an *international* news story. The governor will be in the limelight around the world. He'll *have* to commute you for the act of mercy you showed to that world. If he doesn't, he'll be dead politically." Tim suddenly snapped his fingers. "I just thought of something. I want you to give me an exclusive interview the night you're supposed to be executed. It'll make a great human-interest piece. You'll be contrite, remorseful. You'll be resigned to going to your death, but at the same time at peace with yourself knowing you helped free an innocent woman so that she could return to her kids." Tim smiled. "I'll make a martyr out of you, Stuart. After you're commuted to life, bleeding-heart liberals all over the country, all over the *world,* will be lining up to make you their poster boy, their hero. You'll get so much mail from prison groupies, they'll have to give you an extra cell to use as an office."

Stuart Percy's eyes began to reflect interest. He wet his lips several times as he contemplated the prospects of being a famous person, even if it was behind bars. Maybe he could persuade Jane to visit him, maybe even to marry him in a televised prison ceremony, and maybe they could have conjugal visits. She hadn't looked all that desirable when they met the previous week—it was obvious that prison had taken its toll on her—but after she got out, he knew she'd fix herself up again, get that red hair curled, get her body back in shape—

"I need to think about this," Stuart said. Tim shook his head.

"You haven't got time to think about it, Stuart. I have to get word back to the governor's press secretary. Things have to be put in motion. I need to arrange an interview with Jane for right after you hold your press conference, so she can tell the world what a great person you are, and how grateful she is, maybe even how much she still loves you—*and* she has to begin pleading with the governor to commute your sentence like he commuted hers—"

Stuart loved that part of the plan. "Okay!" he said abruptly. "All right! I'll do it!"

The condemned man's eyes shone with an excitement Tim had never seen before. Saliva formed in the corners of his mouth. He looked like a cannibal who had just been thrown somebody's liver. Tim rose to leave.

"You're a smart man, Stuart. I'll get the ball rolling on the out-

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side. You start working on what you'll say at your press conference. Get word to me as soon as you decide when you want to hold it."

Stuart Percy held his press conference on the third day before he was scheduled to go to the gas chamber.

In a quiet, controlled, seemingly sincere voice, he admitted that he had lied at his trial about Jane's complicity in the murder of Horace Paley—and he at last admitted his own guilt.

"I did it because I loved Jane so much," he said contritely. "I'm very ashamed of it now. I know I have to be punished for my terrible crime, and I am ready to take that punishment. I hope Jane can find it in her heart to forgive me, and I hope that Governor Neal Harris will find it in his heart to set her free so she can be reunited with her two wonderful children." At that point, Stuart blinked his eyes several times as if trying to hold back tears. "That's all I have to say," he concluded, his voice weakening. "Thank you all for listening to me."

The media representatives rushed out to file their stories.

Only to find that National News Wire Service had already released a copyrighted exclusive report, bylined by Timothy Murray, an hour earlier.

Two days later, some eighteen hours before Stuart Percy was scheduled to die, Tim Murray scored another copyrighted exclusive on the news wires just minutes after Governor Neal Harris signed commutation papers releasing Jane from prison. She was not pardoned; that would have left the state vulnerable to a civil lawsuit. Instead, her conviction was allowed to stand, but her sentence was reduced to time served. It was an agreement worked out secretly between Tim Murray and Danny Lopez.

Tim was waiting for Jane when she walked out of prison. He drove her to Phoenix, to a beauty salon where he had arranged for her to have a private makeover, from shampoo to pedicure. He had also purchased for her a stylish, expensive pantsuit, blouse, shoes, and everything she needed to wear, following size and color instructions she had given him before her release. And he bought her a one-way first-class airline ticket to Lincoln, Nebraska, where her children were being raised by her sister and brother-in-law, the Lunds.

"What do you think you'll do with your life now?" Tim asked her at the boarding gate for her flight. Jane shrugged, pushing her sunglasses up into her again curly reddish hair. Macadamia eyes bright now, fashionably attired, fresh from a facial, with new makeup and eyeliner, she no longer looked ten years older than she was.

"I guess I'll just start trying to find my dream again," she told him. "A decent husband, good daddy for my kids, nice house somewhere, respectability." Tilting her head coquettishly, she took him by the coat and pulled him close to her. "Any chance you'd like to apply for the job?"

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"Can't," he told her. "I'm going to Paris. Bureau chief for National News Wire Service. Big-time job."

Jane put her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe to kiss him full on the lips. It was delicious right down to his heels, as he had always imagined it would be.

"You're sure I can't change your mind?"

"I'm sure."

As he watched her walk into the jetway, hips swaying just enough to turn several heads, he thought: *Good thing she didn't kiss me a second time.*

Then he remembered that he never had asked her whether she had been involved in the killing or not.

At ten that night, Tim was let into the Death Row visiting room where Stuart Percy was waiting on the other side of the grille to grant an exclusive interview. He smiled widely as Tim walked up.

"Jane get off all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How'd she look?"

"Like a movie star."

"Damn!" Stuart exclaimed. "I can't wait to start writing to her. I'm going to have her send me some pictures of herself, you know what I mean? Private pictures, just for me."

"Stuart," Tim said quietly, "I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. The governor's not giving you a reprieve."

For a second, Percy's expression froze, then he grinned. "Hey, don't kid about that."

"I'm not kidding."

Now the condemned man's expression froze and remained that way. "But—you said—you said he'd *have* to—"

"Well, things change, Stuart. Newspaper editorials and public opinion polls show that most of the citizens of Arizona think you should be executed."

"But—but, wait a second now—that wasn't the deal. Look, I did my part in this! They can't do this to me!"

"I'm afraid they can, Stuart. And they have. You're going to be executed tonight."

Angry blood now filled Stuart Percy's face. Closing his cuffed hands into fists, he began to pound on the wire grille.

"No! No! This isn't right! This isn't *fair!* You—cannot—let—them—execute—me!"

"I have to, Stuart. My exclusive story of your execution is already written. I'm a reporter. . . . You can't expect me to change my story."

Stuart Percy was still pounding on the grille and screaming when Tim Murray left the visiting room. ●

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THE FACE

by H.R.F. Keating

Julia Fraser, pleasantly tired after the first long walk of her holiday, absorbed in the opening pages of the novel she had brought with her as she waited for her tea, barely looked up when the waiter murmured his request for her order.

She glanced again at the menu card in its white metal stand.

"China tea, please," she said. "And—and, yes, the choice of pastries."

All that sea air at the top of the cliffs had given her an unaccustomed appetite.

"Very good, madam."

Then she did turn to give the waiter a smile of thanks.

And saw his face.

It was a face—remarkably ugly with wide-stretched blubbery lips, pale blue protuberant eyes under almost invisible eyebrows, and a fat, spread-out nose cherry-red at the very tip—that she had seen before. Once. And had never forgotten.

She went cold. Cold in her hands, one keeping open her novel at the page she had reached, the other resting in her lap. Cold right down to her feet in her new summer shoes. Cold to the core, she felt, of her heart.

This was the face that had looked down, sweat glistening, twitching uncontrollably, as the sacklike body had heaved and thumped above her, twenty years before, back in New Zealand, when she was a girl of just nine.

The face was older now. The scanty hair on the scalp had turned from scrubby blondness to patchy grey. The waxy, colourless cheeks had thickened and dropped. But it was unmistakably the same.

The face of the man—she had never known his name, no one had ever identified him—who had disappeared altogether after that appalling act.

So he had come to England, then? It was not unlikely. Escape. He would have wanted that. To be somewhere safe from any

H.R.F. Keating is one of the genre's leading fiction writers, with dozens of novels and stories to his credit. This spring his new novel, *One Man and His Bomb*, book number six in his DCI Harriet Martens series, was published by Allison & Busby in the U.K.; in August, a U.S. edition will be available from St. Martin's Press. †

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chance recognition.

Just as she herself had years afterwards escaped, in a way, to this same distant place. To a different life. A quiet, contained, safe-forever life. Where what had happened had somehow never happened.

Only it had.

Only still in dreams, twenty years later, if now not very often, she saw above her that face in its every ugly detail, heard the panting, the watery grunts, felt on her own face the drops of heavy sweat, the trails of drooled saliva.

What was she to do? She must think. She couldn't just denounce him, here, now, where he was. The deferential hotel waiter, carefully writing on his order pad. But what could she do? What should she do?

And he—Had he recognised her? The small, fear-deadened face he must have seen beneath him when his own, slack-mouthed, shifty-eyed, had been above looking down?

But no. He was turning away, walking softly off. He couldn't have remembered her. After all, there was all the difference in the world between the face of a small, terrified, horrified girl of nine and that of a coolly mature, self-sufficient single woman at the start of a well-earned, quiet holiday in a safe, pleasant, respectable seaside resort.

Surely there was no danger of him knowing her.

But she must do something. She couldn't just sit where she was, wait for him to return with the pot of China tea, the plate of cream-stuffed pastries that she would never now be able to swallow even a mouthful of.

Yet if she simply left, snatched up book and handbag, and ran . . . Left the big, tables-dotted dining room, raced upstairs, packed her things, got out . . . Wouldn't that alert him? Set his mind searching for some tiny, deep-hidden recollection? Something about her that might have somehow half-reminded him of the little girl he had crept up on in the wood all those years ago? All right, her face now, her twenty-nine-year-old impassive face, was not in any way the face of that blankly terrified child. But there might be something.

There were her eyes, after all.

She had always been a little proud of the way she had one blue eye, one greenish. Very few people had eyes like that. She had been proud of them when she was a girl. A girl of five, six, seven, eight. Until the full-stop that had been put into her life at nine. And even today—She had become, well, not proud of them, but pleased about them again. They gave her, she felt, a certain individuality. As a person. Even if, she was determined, she would never be anything more than just a person. Not to anybody. She was, she had to be, just someone to work beside, to chat to on neutral subjects, even to joke with in a mild way. But nothing more. Ever.

But what if the peculiarity of her eyes—Had she looked up at

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him just now long enough for him to have seen it?—had finally, while he was away in the kitchens collecting her pot of tea, her plate of pastries, released something in his memory?

Abruptly, without having made a conscious decision, she pushed back her chair.

Yes, the Ladies'. That was it. She would go—No, she would pretend she had gone to the Ladies', and she would, yes, get away for long enough to think it all out. To decide. But how to make it seem that this was all she was doing? That she had simply gone to visit the hotel restroom? So that when he came back, with the teapot, the hot-water jug, the plate of cakes, if there had not been anything that had triggered off in his memory that little area of soft grass in the middle of the wood in New Zealand twenty years ago, nothing would alert him now?

Yes, leave her book here, on the table, beside the heavy, gleaming white china of her waiting place. Put something in the pages, a marker of some sort, and leave it there, making it seem she would be back in a few minutes to go on reading and sipping at her tea.

And then, up. Up to her room. Hurrying along the wide, carpeted corridor—Her room key was in her bag, thank goodness—and into safety.

In a moment then she could be closing the room door behind her, hearing the lock click home. Secure.

With time to think. To go over it all. What she really felt now at this moment about what had happened to her in that wood then. Now that she could no longer force and force the thought of it away into the very furthest depths of her mind. To think clearly just what she should do about it. Now, today. In England. Twenty years after.

To make up her mind exactly what action to take. To go to the police here and tell them her whole story? Or to go and quietly find out his name from Reception—she could invent some excuse to do that—and then get in touch with the authorities back in New Zealand? Even to do nothing, just get away?

But she could not think. For minute after minute she stood where she was, somewhere near the foot of the room's big bed with its heavily patterned, rigid edge-piped cover. She stood and thought.

Or rather, she came to realise eventually, she had been standing there for minutes on end letting vague, unformed thoughts butt up against each other in her head, advance and retreat, advance again, retreat again, never coming to anything that might be called a conclusion.

Pick up the telephone and ask to be put through to the local police station? Go at once to the big, deep drawers under the desk-cum-dressing table and take out all the clothes she had only just folded into them, pull her case up onto the stand, and pack? Or just ask to speak to the manager? Or get right away, now, this minute. Cautiously open the door, dart along to the fire escape—

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the floor plan was there on the back of the door with red arrows on it—and get away, leaving her clothes and possessions to be sent on to her back at the flat? Or—Or go down again to the dining room and—and challenge him, force it all into the light? Or could she forget about it all, pretend she hadn't noticed that face, make some excuse and move to another hotel, somewhere further along the coast, and carry on with her holiday as if nothing had happened?

She became aware of a soft tapping at the door.

Him? Here? After her? Pursuing her?

No. Impossible. How could he have . . . ? Why should he . . . ?

"Yes?"

She realised no one outside would have heard her choked-out answer. Her throat had been so dry she had scarcely been able to produce any sound.

She tried again.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Room Service, madam."

Yes. Yes, of course. And she had thought it must be him. Somehow. That he must have . . .

She walked quickly over to the door, pulled it open.

And it was not Room Service. It was him. He was standing there. His face just as she had seen it for that single second when she had looked up to thank the anonymous waiter beside her. The wide, blubbery lips, the speading nose with its clear-red tip, the bulging eyes.

She took a step backwards. Away.

And, too late, realised it was what she should never have done. She should have put her shoulder to the door and with her full weight heaved it closed.

But now he was the one closing the door. Softly behind him.

"What—What do you want? Go away. Get out. Get out this instant."

"I brought you your book."

She had never before, she abruptly realised, heard his voice except for that one murmured question about what she had wanted for her tea. It surprised her now by having no New Zealand accent, any more than her own voice had. And, though husky and creaking, it was more cultivated than seemed right for—

For the man who had done that to that child in the wood. Nor could she think what he meant about a book. What book could he be talking about? She hadn't had a book with her there in the wood. He hadn't taken any book away with him when—When at last he had risen up from her and gone lumbering away into the dark greenness under the trees.

"Book? Book? What book?"

"The book you left when you went off without having tea."

Then she remembered. It seemed all very long ago. The moment she had looked up to acknowledge the smooth-voiced waiter tak-

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ing her order and had seen that face from her dreams, from those few appalling, unforgettable minutes in her childhood. But yes. Yes, so as to get away without doing anything to let that man know who she was she had left her book on the table and had pretended she had just gone to the Ladies' Room.

But how . . .

"You put your room card in it as a bookmark, and when I realised you weren't coming back I thought I'd bring it up to you myself."

So had he not recognised her after all? Was he just the waiter bringing the book to her as a simple kindness? Or perhaps in the hope of getting a generous tip? Had she been wrong to have shouted at him to go away like that? What would he have made of all that if—

"Oh, no," he went on, as if in answer to the thoughts she had had in her head, "I knew who you were, all right. Straight away when you turned and looked at me. Those eyes of yours. I wasn't likely to forget them. One blue, one green, staring up at me all the time, never blinking even once. Only it took me a moment to realise you were you, so to speak. It coming as a complete surprise, you being here. In England. And happening to choose just this hotel."

"Yes."

It was all she could think of to say.

They stood for several long moments, both equally silent. Dully, as if it were a thought she felt she ought to be having rather than anything she was actually thinking, she wondered if at any instant he was going to step up to her, put his arms round her, and fling her backwards onto the heavy-patterned and piped bedcover.

And he was the one who at last broke the silence.

"Well, what're you going to do?"

"To do?"

"Yes. About me. I mean, you know who I am. What I did. I realised that the moment I came back with your pastries and found you'd gone. I thought at first you must be getting the police, or the manager. But then, when nothing happened, I saw that room card sticking out of the book, so I decided I'd come up here and find out what you meant to do."

"Yes. Yes, well, I hadn't—It's just that I hadn't altogether made up my mind. And now . . ."

Another silence. But not such a long one.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Listen," she said, temporising hard, "have you . . . ? I mean, did you come over here directly after—directly afterwards?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. I had to get away to somewhere. I thought you'd be able to give a good description of me. I was scared stiff I'd be picked up at any moment."

"Yes. Well, I could describe you. I did. I mean, your face is—Well, it's easy to describe."

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"I'm an ugly bugger. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. Yes, I suppose it is."

"And have you ever thought what life is like for someone with a face like mine? A face that scares every girl who ever sees it?"

"No."

She forced herself to look once again fully at that face. The blubbery lips, protruding eyes, waxen cheeks, squashy red-tipped nose.

"No," she said at last. "But I see . . ."

She could not bring herself to go on.

"You see why I did what I did back then?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. It—it doesn't make it any better. For me. But I do see how it must have been, when you came across that little girl, all alone in the woods there, that pretty little girl, that you . . ."

Again she could not go on.

"Yes. That I did what I did."

Yet another silence. This time she was the one who broke it.

"Look, how often has this happened? How often has—has that happened? Since?"

He gave her a long, louring look from those pale protuberant eyes.

"Would you believe never?"

She thought.

"Yes," she said at last. "Yes, I do believe that."

"So?"

Thoughts once more swirled hopelessly in her head. The only one that seemed at all real was the remembered sight of that face as it had looked above her.

But she ought to answer. She must.

"Well, yes," she got out at last. "Yes, all right. I believe you. But I think you'll have to leave the hotel. No. No, I'll go. There's no reason why you should lose a perfectly good job because of me. I'll—I'll tell them I've had a message, that I've got to cut my holiday short."

She thought of her flat back in London. The heavy outer door. The deadlock, the mortice. Safety.

He was looking at her long and hard.

"All right," he said eventually. "Thanks."

He thrust at her the book he had been holding out in front of him the whole time. She took it, and glanced at the spine to see what it was that she had been reading. Before. She realised she had forgotten every word.

And when she looked up again he was gone.

It was only a week later, idly watching on the early evening news some amateurish, hand-held video shots of a spectacular car chase along a coast road high above the sea, a road that seemed vaguely familiar, that, as she saw the leading car spin suddenly over the cliff at a corner, she took in what the newsreader had been saying. *The child who was attacked is in hospital receiving counselling.* ●

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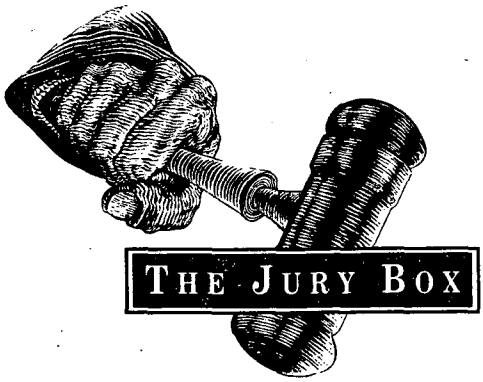

by Jon L. Breen

Long before Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* the art world was a fruitful setting for crime and detective fiction, as often for satire as for conspiracy theory. In his 1938 Dr. Thorndyke novel *The Stoneware Monkey,* R. Austin Freeman skewered the modern art of his day through the words of a pretentious critic: "The words 'abstract form' . . . evoke in me the conception of that essential, pervading, geometric substructure which persists when all the trivial and superficial accidents of mere visual appearance have been eliminated. In short, it is the fundamental rhythm which is the basic aesthetic factor underlying all our abstract conceptions of spatial limitation. Do I make myself clear?" I wonder what Freeman would make of the art described in the first three books considered below, which view the contemporary scene's desperate search for innovation and its occasional charlatanism from a variety of perspectives.

*** Lauren Kelly: *Blood Mask,* Ecco, $24.95. Even without the cover disclosure "Joyce Carol Oates writing as . . ." the unmistakably edgy and energized style would tip off the true authorship of this modern gothic, in which teenage Annemarie Straube comes to live with her beautiful, mercurial, and very weird aunt Drewe Hildebrand, operator of a Hudson River artists' colony. The mystery may keep you guessing even after you turn the last page, but most memorable are the descriptions of avant-garde art gimmicks, including the frozen-blood death masks of the title. The aunt's summary of her old friend Andy Warhol ("an utterly empty man, a vacant space. . . .There can be greatness in such emptiness, I think.") is especially remarkable.

*** Chad Taylor: *Departure Lounge,* Europa, $14.95. This haunting and finely crafted specimen of New Zealand noir may also have you guessing past the end. Career burglar Mark Chamberlain revisits a mystery of his high school days: the disappearance of classmate Caroline May back in 1979. The art observations, in this case of

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photography, come late in the novel but are worth waiting for: "He believed art, after all, was about what it didn't show: what it couldn't capture. Like fire. Like light. Like the past. For it to be gone, man: maybe that's what it is to be there." I believe Taylor's intent is satirical, but I could be wrong.

** Linda Johns: *Hannah West in the Belltown Towers,* Sleuth/ Puffin, $5.99. In an art mystery for a much younger audience (ten and up), works of trendy and remarkably versatile painter Mimi Hansen are disappearing right and left, and 12-year-old dog-walker Hannah, who with her art critic mother has moved into a posh Seattle high rise for a house-sitting gig, takes the case. This is a throwback to a gentler time of juvenile mysteries—no murder, simple mystery, little real danger—and the main villain is too transparently phony to fool even the most clueless grown-up, let alone a precocious girl sleuth. Still, Hannah is likable, and a lively narrator.

*** Jonathan Kellerman: *Gone,* Ballantine, $26.95. As a consultant to the Los Angeles Police Department, psychologist Alex Delaware shares the investigations of his friend Milo Sturgis, a gay homicide cop who officially works without a partner. Their typically expert twentieth case begins with a publicity stunt—the faked abduction of two acting students—that turns more serious with the murder of the female half of the team. Kellerman recalls the late Ed McBain in his one-word titles, prolific output (25 novels plus two children's books since 1985), mesmerizing perfect-pitch dialogue, and in this case a distinctly 87th Precinct-like touch: a reproduced Homicide Investigation Progress Report listing four pages of physical evidence gathered.

*** Stephen King: *Cell,* Scribner, $26.95. Another admirer of McBain also likes one-word titles, is similarly prolific, and has a comparable gift for compelling readability. A mysterious impulse from who-knows-where turns Boston cell-phone users into homicidal maniacs. One could argue that King gets into blood-spurting Grand Guignol gross-out mode a little too early this time. But once the story, centering on sane non-cell users' efforts to escape the madness, gets into gear, his astonishing narrative impetus and imaginative power grip the reader.

** G.A. McKevett: *Corpse Suzette,* Kensington, $22. In her tenth appearance, California private eye Savannah Reid, upholder of the full-figured woman, looks into the disappearance of a beautiful plastic surgeon with a Marilyn Monroe fixation. This is an okay cozy, with many of the usual advantages (humor, punning title, cat on the jacket, no formal recipes but lots of food descriptions) and some of the common faults (padding, lack of fair-play clues). Several of the characters, including the cop love interest, are entertaining enough on the page but would be insufferable if met in real life.

For understandable reasons,

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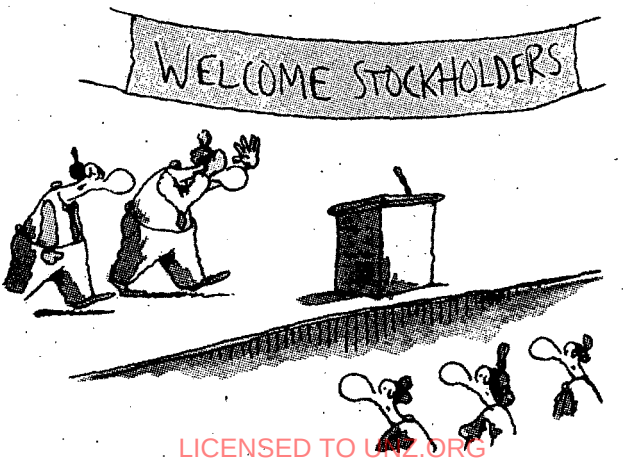
crime fiction has probably produced more convict authors than other genres. One of the best of them was Malcolm Braly (1925-1980), two of whose dark and powerful paperback originals, *Shake Him Till He Rattles [and] It's Cold Out There* (Stark House, $19.95), first published in 1963 and 1966 respectively, have been reprinted in one volume with an on-the-money introduction by Ed Gorman. In the latter book, the sense of noirish pessimism doesn't really dissipate even when Braly starts handing out perfunctory happy endings to some of his characters.

Dana Martin Batory's *Sherlock Holmes: A Baker Street Dozen* + (Gryphon, $16) gathers 14 brief and enjoyable Sherlockian essays in a hundred pages. Of special interest is a 1978 piece on Holmes references in the Saint stories, followed by a brief reply from author Leslie Charteris. Some of the amusing comments quoted may inspire readers to discover (or rediscover) the highly entertaining Saint saga. Among the other topics: Sherlockian connections in the works of Sax Rohmer and James Hilton, parallels between Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* and a Holmes card game marketed by Parker Brothers in 1904.

The publisher of Gryphon Books, Gary Lovisi, is also a prolific writer of fiction. "The Adventure of the Missing Detective," his surprising 2004 Edgar nominee, wins few points for style, but its application to Holmes's post-Reichenbach years of a standard science fictional gambit is exceedingly clever. Curious readers can check it out in either of two places: the trade paper reprint of the 2004 anthology *Sherlock Holmes: The Hidden Years* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $14.95), edited by Michael Kurland, or the collection *The Adventure of the Missing Detective and 25 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories* (Carroll & Graf, $16.95), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg. (I contributed a year-in-review essay to the latter volume.)



"Snap out of it, sir! It's not time for the perp walk."

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

MURDER MEDIUM RARE

by William Link

Franco Calderella, the godfather, called Salvedore (Sally) from his suburban fortress on Staten Island. "I want you to see my whacko daughter." He laughed, but Sally wasn't fooled. Virna was the apple of his eye, also tangerine, pear, kumquat, and what-have-you. The young woman was a graduate of Princeton, summa cum laude, a poli-sci and Women's Studies major, straight-A student with a mouth that could talk Mario Cuomo under the table. The fact that she was in the vanguard of the various women's movements did not sit too well with her sexist-pig father but he dismissed all that with an indulgent, helpless shrug.

"What's on her mind?" Sally asked cautiously.

"How should *I* know? She wants to talk to you personally."

"She still in that fancy place on Park Avenue?"

Franco sighed. "Mexico City."

"Mexico City! What's she doin' in beaner-town, for Chris'sake?"

Sally could feel almost telepathically another of Franco's shrugs. "Some female thing down there."

"Feminist," Sally corrected.

"Yeah, yeah, one of those way-out projects she gets involved with.

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Someday she'll grow up, get married, give me some grandkids."

Sally stubbed out his cigar. "Why can't I talk to her on the phone?"

"She wants you *there,* Sally. She doesn't want to get into it over the horn. I said you'd book reservations when you get around to it. Meaning now." Silence. "You with me?"

Resigned: "Sure, sure. I guess I'm gonna miss my nephew's birthday."

"Tell him it's business. Besides, he'll have a lot more birthdays if he keeps his nose clean."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Yeah. Don't drink the water down there."

With his longtime writing partner Richard Levinson, William Link created many popular TV series, including *Mannix*. Along the way, however, they began to question how the violence depicted on TV, in shows such as *Mannix*, impacted viewers, and they decided to change tack. Their next creation was *Columbo*. Like *Columbo*, this hit-man story is full of humor and without the explicit violence its category suggests. ¶

Sally flew down the next morning on Mexicana and checked into the El Camino in Chapultepec Park. It was big, bold, minimalist, with a huge Tamayo mural in the lobby. He had never been south of the border before and he felt vaguely anxious, fish out of water, lost in a land where people probably never heard of pasta carbonara and thought espresso was a delivery service. Sally was a heavy, lumbering man with prematurely graying hair and a red-rimmed potato nose. He relished his job with the Calderella family but these days he was a little worn down from too much scotch and too little sleep.

He went to the hotel bar for some fortifying shots of Cutty, then took a cab to Virna's apartment on the Reforma, the city's main boulevard. The smog was incredible—you could see it moving like slow-moving phantoms in the streets.

It figured: The girl lived in the penthouse. She was alone when he came up, a tall, statuesque brunette, no makeup, hair upswept into a knot on top of her head.

"Uncle Sally," she said, trying to encircle his burlap-sack body in a hug. "Putting on weight again."

He wasn't her uncle, but he had been around since she was a day out of the delivery room. She led him into a room with a skylight showing the hot blue sky crisscrossed with contrails from jets. She didn't ask him about his trip down, his hotel accommodations, or even about his life in general, but immediately launched into her business. She always had a slight lisp as a kid and it hadn't gone away. ". . . it's the national sport here—even though it

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isn't really a sport, it's a ritual—"

"Yeah, I—" Sally began, but she ignored him.

"And it's a disgrace. They slaughter these poor innocent animals in front of thousands of people and millions more on cable around the world."

"If I could—"

"It's brutal and barbaric. This is the twenty-first century, not the Middle Ages with their torture racks and thumbscrews."

"But it's the custom here, Virna. It's something—"

"—that's got to be stopped. These matadors, these national idols in their macho sexy tights, their—"

"Virna—could you please hold it a minute? Is this why your father sent me all the way down here—to listen to a lecture on the evils of bullfighting? Give me a break, honey." He took out a cigar but held it unlit, remembering Virna hated smoking of any kind.

"This is a job," she said, off her riff now, pouring them tall glasses of iced tea from a sweating pitcher. "I want you to kill Maldonado."

"Wait a minute. Who?"

"Maldonado. He's their star matador."

Sally sank into a deeply upholstered chair; his jet lag felt like a scotch hangover. "You want me to whack a bullfighter?"

She was looking at her glossy-smooth fingernails. "So what's the problem, Sally? How many guys have you whacked for Daddy—a dozen or so over the years? What did their occupations have to do with anything?" She shot him a mischievous look. "I thought you were an equal opportunity hit man."

Sally expelled his breath, digging out his dog-eared notebook and a pencil. "What's this guy's first name?"

"Bullfighters don't have first names. He's Maldonado. Like Madonna. Or Elvis."

"Elvis is a first name."

"So sue me."

Sally frowned. "What's his address?"

Virna shrugged, annoyed. "The Plaza Mexico where he practices his *tauromaquia.*"

"He *lives* in the bullring?"

Her first smile. "Of course not. But that's where you kill him—during one of his triumphs, right after he's murdered the bull and the *presidente* is about to award him the ears or the testicles or whatever." Her dark eyes lit up. "What a message it will send to the world—bullfighters, like the rest of us, have to pay for their crimes!"

Sally shook his head, suddenly feeling nauseous. He gulped at the iced tea, coughed.

"Something wrong?" Virna asked, uncharacteristically solicitous. "You look pale."

"Jet lag," Sally mumbled. "Maybe I need some air."

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She showed him out to the balcony that overlooked the twisting serpent of traffic below on the Reforma. The sun flashing on chrome hurt his eyes.

"You feeling any better, Sally?" Virna asked, leaning on the parapet. He was her own personal contract killer now so it figured she was suddenly protective of him.

Sally nodded. He wondered if the drugstores down here sold Maalox or Pepto-Bismol. "I'm okay," he said, trying a weak smile. "When exactly am I supposed to off this guy?"

"Tomorrow, Sunday afternoon, four, at the *corrida.* It's on Calle Augusto Rodin, every cab driver knows it."

"But I don't have my piece. With all this nine-eleven security I can never bring it through the metal detectors at the airports."

"Not to worry. All that will be taken care of when we meet for dinner tonight. You'll be given your final instructions then."

Final instructions. Another control freak like her father—you couldn't beat the genes.

"And Sally," Virna went on, her face darkening like the Wicked Witch of the North. "I smelled liquor on your breath when you came. There will be no drinking on this job. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, no problem." Sally held his breath against the noxious fumes rising from the traffic. Maybe it was time to think about retirement, although he knew foot soldiers in the Family were signed up for life. But what galled him was that he had enlisted to serve Franco, not his nutcase daughter!

Sally took a shower at the hotel and lay on the bed with a towel draped across his hips. He puffed on a Double Corona, which managed to tame the cartwheeling butterflies in his stomach. He got up, dressed in a light poplin suit, and went down to the lobby for a forbidden scotch.

Puffing away, he asked the barman, "How good's this guy Maldonado?"

"*Magnifico, señor.* He moves like the wind, like sunlight."

"Hmmm. How old is this Señor Sunlight?"

The middle-aged barman smiled, revealing more gold than Fort Knox. "Twenty-eight."

"He's married, kids?"

"Oh no." Another smile, a lewd one this time. "He has *muchas* senoritas. He takes his *pasión* from the ring into his bed."

"And if I want to see this wind and sunlight fella—he's fighting tomorrow?"

"Yes, señor. Big bulls. They say shipped all the way from Cordoba. He shakes his *muleta* like a marimba—make them big bulls samba."

Funny custom, Sally thought. They make heroes out of skinny kids in tights waving crazy capes. Harmless dudes, and yet Virna wanted to kill one. And that was the problem—how was he going to pull it off in front of several thousand cheering fans?

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Virna had a plan.

They met in a small, chic restaurant in the Zona Rosa, an upscale part of town filled with jewelry shops and cafes.

Virna wore a velvet pants suit, her hair freed from the knot, shimmering to her shoulders. Her dark eyes were intense to the point of maniacal.

Sally, ill at ease, opened the menu and stared at what appeared to be a crossword puzzle in Spanish.

Virna smirked. "You need a *diccionario,* my friend. Allow me to order for you."

"I still got a queasy stomach, Virna. Get me some scrambled eggs, will you?"

"God," she murmured, "you're the perfect American *turista.* Look, I'm not going to get us kicked out of here. The chef can whip you up some *huevos rancheros.*

Trepidation: "What's that?"

"Eggs. Mexican style."

She waved over the hovering captain and spoke to him in rapid-fire Spanish. The man nodded solemnly as if he had just received funeral instructions, and slipped mournfully away.

Virna handed Sally a claim check.

"What's this?" he asked.

"There's a Masonite suitcase in the hat-check room here. Inside you'll find a Ruger Mini-14 rifle. Are you familiar with this weapon?"

"Ah—no."

"Well, you have some time, not a lot, to familiarize yourself with it. Daddy says you're very proficient with guns—*when you are not drinking.* There's also a Leupold sniper scope, best of the line, I'm told."

Sally felt the nail files again in his gut. "Who got you this stuff?"

"Doesn't matter, everything's untraceable. You just concentrate on your job. God, Sally, you're really beginning to show your age."

"Virna," he said with a baleful look, "I'm only fifty-five years old."

"There's a ticket in the suitcase to the Plaza Mexico. Go to the top tier past the TV booth where they do the local and the remote coverage."

"They really televise these things?"

"All the way to the People's Republic of China. But you won't stick around to take a bow."

"Look, I've whacked guys in phone booths, flophouses, even at the urinal, but they don't have TV cameras in those places."

She smiled, clicking her glass of mineral water against his. "So this'll really be a first for you, Sally. Congratulations."

"Okay," he said, scowling. "I'm on the top tier. What happens next?"

Virna was listening to the guitarist playing on a little dais near

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them. Another smile appeared on her pale, undecorated lips. "You're going to appreciate how well I've worked this out. . . ."

Sally slept little that night. He watched the trees across the park from his window for a long time as dawn came slowly up like a blush of embarrassment.

He had checked out the rifle and mounted the sniper scope before he went to bed, noting the parts were well-oiled and ready for action, bullets filling the clip. He had never seen a bullfight before, but he doubted that he was going to enjoy this one. Watching the trees grow pink with the hot new day, he pondered what he was going to do. Franco's targets were all scumbags, mobsters, snitches, men who had committed murders themselves. What had this bullfighter done to anybody? Whacked some goddamned bulls? His uncle Mario used to put bulls out of their misery in the Chicago stockyards. They ended up as juicy porterhouses and T-bones in the best steakhouses all over the country. With a nice bottle of Dago red it made people feel comfortable, happy, civilized. He was even sure these Mexican bulls had the same destination—they were probably serving some of Maldonado's victims in the very restaurant where they had eaten last night. So what was this stupid message Virna was sending to the People's Republic of China? Certainly not to steak-lovers!

He spent the very early afternoon strolling through the park, skipped lunch, and bought a *paleta,* a delicious frozen juice bar from a sidewalk vendor. Then he had a last cigar and a double scotch before setting off for the bullfight, the masonite suitcase swinging at his side.

It seemed an eternity getting there—maybe the cabdriver was taking him "around the horn," a roundabout way to build up the fare—but he didn't care since he had plenty of time and plenty of money.

The arena looked like a much smaller version of Yankee Stadium and Sally felt a tinge of homesickness. Jeez, get this thing over with so he could wing back to New York, where they spoke the lingo and he could read the menus.

He joined the boisterous crowd sweeping into the arena, working-class families all happy and talkative as if they were out for a picnic.

Once inside he looked around for an elevator, tired already from lugging the suitcase, but he couldn't find one so he took an ancient flight of stairs to the upper level. He was winded by the time he reached the top and he silently cursed himself for bypassing lunch. His pump seemed to be working double-time and he wondered why this hit had him more agitated than all the others.

He slouched along the tiled walkway, past casually dressed young technicians manning the TV cameras, their cables coiling into the central monitoring booth, and brushed by a beer vendor hawking to potential customers. He implored Sally, who pretended

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not to hear.

There was a half-painted wooden door at the end of the walkway, far distant from the television crew, and Sally tried the knob. It was unlocked, just as Virna had told him, and it opened as if it had been recently oiled just like the gun.

It was some kind of storage room, crates, torn and faded bullfight posters on the sagging walls, a half-eaten burrito crawling with maggots in a corner.

Following instructions, he ripped off the slats barring the window that overlooked the bright bowl of the bullring.

Next he opened the suitcase and reassembled the Ruger rifle, finally carefully mounting the sniper scope.

In the restaurant he had voiced his fear of the noise when he fired and Virna had assured him that the nearest TV cameras were unmanned robots controlled by the director inside his soundproofed booth. The roar of the crowd would also help cloak the shots.

Sally, sweating now in the confines of his crumpled poplin suit, stood at the window, staring down past the tumbled rows of fans to where some sort of parade of matadors and their assistants was circling around the ring. A trumpet-dominated band was braying out its music like a crazy calliope. There was one tall, very lithe matador who seemed to command more of the crowd's attention than the others. He moved with the effortless grace of a ballet dancer, an economy of movement, bowing and sweeping his hat from his head to a cortege of pretty young women in a box near the ring. This had to be the great Maldonado.

A series of preliminary contests began featuring various matadors facing an increasingly belligerent succession of bulls. Sally was impressed with the thundering size and speed of these beasts, black as tar, fearless as dragons in a dream. A few of the matadors had trouble, one or two barely avoided being gored. One painfully thin fellow tripped and fell—and a bunch of helpers quickly surrounded him waving a washline of capes to distract the bull.

Sally was slightly repulsed by the way these helpers drove sharp sticks into the bulls' shoulders, obviously wearing them down. This seemed very unfair even though Virna had explained that it wasn't a contest between man and beast, but rather a ritual where the bull's destiny was to die.

Finally it was showtime—Maldonado was prancing round the ring again like a circus pony, orchestrating with little smiles and gestures the roars of the adoring crowd. Good for me, Sally thought, hefting the rifle to his shoulder and following his moving target through the sniper scope. With roars like that this thing is going to sound even quieter than a popgun going off. All I need is time to get out of here while all hell breaks loose.

Virna had told him that Maldonado would fight several bulls so Sally should take his time lining up his target, getting the mata-

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dor's moves down, and not going off half-cocked.

Sally vetoed any shot while the action was across the ring. He had to make this as easy as possible for himself. Tracking Maldonado through the scope was almost like watching him on a television set—concentrating on the head, a blond coin bisected by the dark hat. Using the muzzle of the gun, he knocked out another pane of glass in the window, and then ducked down as a vendor passed quickly by.

The crowd erupted with an ear-splitting series of *"Olés"* as Maldonado nimbly evaded the bull's charges, confounding the angered beast as it was forced to almost pirouette with its prey.

Sally, almost kneeling now, steadying the rifle against the lower frame of the window, held his breath as he had learned in the army, and waited for the perfect moment to squeeze off a shot. It came just as Maldonado slid like a ghost from a lunge. The crowd roared—and he fired.

He watched horror-stricken as the bull, not the matador, fell like a sack of cement!

There was a beat of stunned silence in the vast arena—the crowd caught in mid shout—then a crescendo of cries, curses.

Sally, in a daze, was managing to break down the gun, stuffing it back into the suitcase. People were running by outside, shouting.

He left the little room, the suitcase dragging at his side, glancing quickly down into the bullring where a ring of people was gathered around the twitching animal, its blood pooling out onto the packed earth. Maldonado stood apart from them, a solitary figure suddenly stripped of his glory.

Sally staggered down the stairs, head down, the suitcase bumping against his thigh. It was incredible—he had killed the damn bull instead of the matador. And Virna, he knew, was an animal-rights freak!

Men were clustered at the exits, some silent, others gesticulating, talking in baffled voices. Sally pushed his way past them, using the suitcase as a wedge, unnoticed as police scrambled up the stairs. Sweat blurring his vision, he stumbled out into the searing sunlight. There were clumps of excited people out there, too, lanes of old-model cars, tangles of motorbikes and motorcycles. Still jumpy with adrenaline, his shirt glued to his body, he made his way toward a convoy of waiting taxis, the drivers standing near them, smoking, arguing.

One thought crowded out the others in Sally's mind: It was the first time he had ever missed his target. And then another thought, clothed in bitter humor, pushed that one away—and it became almost a mantra as he was driven back to the hotel: Maybe after this he had better stick to humans.

At the Camino Real the desk clerk gave him four telephone messages, all from Virna. He crumpled them in his fist like losing

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parimutuel slips.

As he opened the door to his room he could hear the telephone ringing. He dropped the suitcase in the middle of the floor and went slowly, wearily to the phone. "Virna?"

"You stupid inept bastard," she said, her voice low, surprisingly under control, packed in dry ice. "I never asked you to do anything for me before. You were always Daddy's man, his pack mule, his fetch. 'Good old Sally,' he'd laugh, 'dumb as hell but he always gets the job done.'"

Sally gritted his teeth, anger flaring up like butane, but he managed to keep quiet. He had screwed up big time, and he had no excuses: Contract killing was his job description, his specialty.

"Well, you're not getting off the hook," she went on, her voice subzero. "Write this down—I don't trust your old man's drunken memory—"

He fumbled for a memo pad on the bureau. "Yeah?"

"'Maria'. It's a working-class cantina—Eight forty-four Caliente. Got that, Pack Mule?"

"Yeah. Eight forty-four."

"Maldonado goes there with his sycophants after every fight—it's another damn ritual. I hope to God you still have the gun."

"I have it right here."

"Then finish the job. I don't care how you do it." She choked back a dry sob. "The TV said the bull took a long time to die. I really hope someday when *you* die it takes twice as long."

He was going to tell her he was sorry, but the words lodged in his throat.

"And Sally?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

"Get it done, Pack Mule."

He rested for almost an hour, then went down to the bar and enjoyed a few scotches. "You heard about Maldonado?" the grim barman asked him. "You were there, señor?"

"Nah. I couldn't make it."

The man was disconsolate, polishing a glass again and again. "I feel so sorry—sorry for him."

"The bull?"

"No. Maldonado."

Sally waited another half-hour and then took a cab back to Virna's building,

Virna was still alone, perched in front of the television console with a tall glass of iced tea. Her hair was all undone and she was wearing some kind of pink peignoir. "Done deal?" she asked, her voice only slightly edged with anxiety. "There's been nothing on the tube yet."

Sally nodded. "It might take a little while to get on the news, but

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I kid you not, Virna, it'll be there."

Virna matched his nod, very businesslike now, as usual. "There's an envelope on the table over there."

Money? He couldn't take her money. It was a Japan Airlines envelope.

"You're leaving tomorrow for Tokyo," she said. This was the old Virna again, the same feverish light in her dark eyes that he had first seen when she was a little kid. "Your next assignment, Sally."

He was more than caught off-guard. "What do you mean? Who's it this time?"

"His name is Hari Kurataki. He's the president of a huge fishing cartel. His fleet hunts down dolphins in the South China Sea." She glared at him as if he had a harpoon. "And sit down—you're jerking around like a jumping bean. I'll allow you one scotch."

"N-no. Thanks."

"He's a menace. He's one of the monsters who's systematically destroying God's creatures in our oceans."

Sally looked down at an inviting chair but he didn't sit. A breeze from the balcony ruffled his sweat-drenched hair.

"He's the perfect symbol," Virna said. "I only wish we could gut him from stem to stern like one of his poor defenseless victims." A smile cracked her face. "But a bullet will do nicely."

Sally nodded, more to himself than to her. The mantra was slowly wending through his mind again.

Back in the good old U. S. of A. Sally got a call from Franco Calderella. His voice sounded hoarse, old, coated with an unusual emotion. "Bad news, Sally. God, I can't believe it."

"What's wrong? What?"

"Just found out." His voice almost broke. "Virna died in Mexico City."

"No! I just saw her last night."

"I know, I know. It must've happened right after you left her. She fell off the balcony there—they found her body in the goddamn street."

"Horrible, Franco, horrible . . ."

His breath rattled the receiver. "I know. Maybe she was drinking, but she never drank. But she called me about you, Sally."

Sally took the cigar from his mouth. "She did?"

"Yeah. She said you'd messed up on that bullfighter but she knew you would fix everything up."

Sally smiled. "That's—very good to hear, Franco."

"Just wanted you to know . . . Well, I got arrangements to make. Talk to you later."

Sally hung up and stretched. His big, celebratory corona had gone out. As he relit it, the Mexico City mantra ran again through his head: *Always stick to humans* . . . ●

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Who's Alfredo, the Big Bad Wolf?

by William Bankier

She encountered him in the Rainbow Bar on Stanley Street. It was Friday evening, happy hour. The Canadiens would soon be taking to the ice at the Forum. Most of the patrons were feasting on the idea of being through for the weekend. The women were all looking especially pretty in the dim light. The married men had forgotten their wives and the singles were expecting to get lucky.

Her name was Mariette Hubert. A tall man wandered from beyond the curve in the bar and slipped onto the empty stool beside her. He was carrying two opened bottles of beer. He placed one in front of her.

"You're about ready for this," he said.

She was almost finished with the beer she had been working on. He sounded respectable and he had brought her the brand she was drinking. "Many thanks," she said, taking a hit. Like all free beers, it tasted better than the one she had paid for.

"There's something honest about a woman who drinks from the bottle."

"I could be faking it."

"Is that a warning?"

"Just a bit of barroom humor."

"Are you a funny girl?"

Mariette swallowed more beer. "Actually, I'm an off-duty cop."

"And I was about to steal your purse."

William Bankier is the sort of writer a short-story magazine cherishes. With the exception of a series of novels he wrote for hire years ago, all of his considerable fictional output has been in the short form. He has sold nearly two hundred mystery stories, most to this magazine, but also to *AHMM* and to anthologies. At least one of his tales was also adapted for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. This new one's a Baytown story.

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"Who steals my purse steals trash. It's my good name I want to preserve."

"Which is?"

"Mariette Hubert."

She gave it the French pronunciation: "You-bear."

"I'm Alfredo Stevens." They shook hands, fingers moist from the cold bottles.

They marched arm-in-arm to Ben's Deli, where they occupied another two stools at the counter and watched the man make a couple of smoked-meat sandwiches, lean as possible. The coffee came in thick white mugs with spoons in them.

"Are you really a cop?"

"No," she lied. "I answer phones at R&B Advertising. Up in the Shell Tower." Then she said, "You don't sound like an Alfredo. You speak like an Anglo."

"My mother gave me the name. She left Cuba when Castro took over. Went to Florida. Came up here later to teach languages at McGill. My old man is Warren Stevens, the news anchor at Channel 10."

It was in a taxi on the way to the rooming house on lower Drummond that Mariette began hating herself for being so loose. If she could stay out of bars, reduce her intake of beer, not be so approachable, then these encounters with strangers would level off and she would not wake up feeling so used and useless. But she could not stay out of bars.

The room was high-ceilinged and sparse, with a crucifix over the bed like the Gaspé farmhouse of her childhood. She went to the bathroom first and, to be on the safe side, opened her purse and checked the magazine in her automatic. He seemed harmless but she had been told the Zodiac Killer had seemed harmless.

Alfredo was stretched out on the bed fully dressed. She made no attempt to join him but stood by the window peering at her reflection in the dark glass. He said, "This isn't going to work, is it?"

"I think not."

"You really are a cop."

"That's right."

"Were you on duty in the bar? Looking for somebody?"

"No. I just like bars."

"So you're not all bad." He got off the bed in an athletic movement and stood between her and the door. "Are you packing?"

In response, she slid the automatic out of her purse and held it pointing at the ceiling.

He stood aside. "Why don't you get the hell out of here."

She walked to the door and opened it. Turning in the doorway,

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still holding the gun, she said, "*Au revoir,* Alfredo. That means 'Till we meet again.'"

He gave her a charming smile. "You don't know what you're missing."

Ten days later she was sitting in the lieutenant's office in the station house on Maisonneuve. His name was Gordie Cleary and he was from some little place in Ontario called Baytown, youngest son of a cop famous for his integrity. Before getting into police work he had played a couple of seasons of pro football with the Alouettes until he was blindsided by a linebacker with the Edmonton Eskimos. The hit blew out his knee, leaving him a step too slow to run pass patterns. Now he was the youngest man of his rank on the force.

Cleary was briefing her. "He bites his victims on the back and shoulders while he's raping them. That's where the 'Wolfman' nickname comes from. They don't scream because he strangles them first."

"Four victims so far," Mariette said, "according to *La Presse.*"

"Five. A waitress from Dinty Moore's restaurant. Her body was found this morning under some bushes on McGill campus." Cleary's size-13 oxblood bluchers were propped on the desk. She could see the steel plates set into leather heels. The story around the station was that the lieutenant owned only one pair of shoes; when they were worn through he walked into a repair shop and waited while they were half-soled.

"Am I on the case?"

"Yes. Stay undercover. Go on making your drug arrests. But keep an eye open for any freaky activity. Two of these women were picked up in bars."

Mariette was not ready to mention her encounter with Alfredo Stevens. Their visit to the rooming house was not something she was proud of. And he was probably nothing more than another guy looking for a one-night stand. While she herself, drinking more than she should, had almost gone along for the ride.

However, just in case Alfredo had a history, she had an idea where she could go to ask a few questions.

The offices of station CKMO-TV were located in a converted film studio on Côte-des-Neiges. A retouched photograph of Warren Stevens dominated one of the plastic walls in the reception area.

Mariette flashed her badge and was delivered over to a male intern who ushered her into the presence.

Several people were working at desks under a wall of screens offering feeds of all local stations and every American network. Warren Stevens's immaculate silver hair was visible beyond the doorway of his private cubicle. He stood to greet his visitor, taking

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her extended hand in both of his. The broadcaster immediately liked this tidy young woman in her tailored jeans and stylish leather jacket. Her attitude was respectful of him and he appreciated that.

She said yes to coffee, which the intern delivered quickly in a station mug. "Do I get to keep this?"

"And we can find you a T-shirt."

"I know you're busy, Mr. Stevens."

"Call me Warren."

"Thank you. I met your son Alfredo a couple of weeks ago."

"I don't think so."

"He bought me a drink in the Rainbow Bar."

"Miss Hubert, my son died last year. He was murdered in his apartment in Los Angeles."

Her interview with the famous broadcaster convinced Mariette of what she had to do. She booked a flight to Los Angeles departing Montreal on the following weekend. Now she was standing on the sidewalk outside the Ramada Hotel on Santa Monica Boulevard. She was on vacation, spending her own money, but she was also on the job. She had not wanted to tell Gordie Cleary she was following up on her private investigation of the man who called himself Alfredo Stevens. That would open up the matter of her bar-hopping and sleeping around. Cleary's straight-arrow character might not appreciate such behavior in his female detective. Her asking for a week off in the middle of the Wolfman investigation had not pleased him much. But he had said okay.

Mariette walked into the garage below the hotel and got into the car she had rented at the airport. Following directions from a desk clerk, she drove up San Vicente and turned right onto Sunset into West Hollywood. Warren Stevens had been surprisingly open about the details of his son's murder. Alfredo was gay and he left town to avoid embarrassing his father. His L.A. apartment was on Hampton Avenue. A visitor had stabbed Alfredo twenty-seven times. There was no doubt in Mariette's mind that the killer had stolen his victim's identity and was the man who had bought her a beer at the Rainbow.

With any luck she might discover something about him here which could assist in further investigation back in Montreal. She was not spinning her wheels, Mariette told herself. The bogus Alfredo Stevens could very well be the Wolfman. She had spent time with him; her instinct said her suspicions had merit.

An elderly man was sweeping leaves outside the Hampton Apartments. Mariette parked the car across the street and approached with a smile on her face. The man stopped sweeping and watched her with obvious appreciation.

"Are you the manager?"

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"Sort of. I keep things neat, the owner gives me a break on my rent. If you're looking for a place there are no vacancies."

She showed her badge and ID. "I understand there was a murder here last year."

"That Canadian guy. He didn't deserve what happened to him."

"Tell me about it."

"His girlfriend chopped him up with a hunting knife. The knife was found on the bathroom floor but she took off. They never found her."

"You say girlfriend. I was told the victim was gay."

"No way. Jack Mackie had women coming and going like trains."

"Are we talking about the same case? I heard the victim's name was Alfredo Stevens."

"Detective, I get to look at the leases. This guy's name was Jack Mackie." The old man went back to his sweeping.

Mariette returned to the car and sat behind the wheel, thinking. Then she switched on, performed a U-turn, and rolled up to where the man was scooping leaves into a cloth sack. She pressed the button that lowered the passenger-side window. "You said the girl took off?"

"She had help. Her father showed up and drove her away."

"You know it was her father?"

"Not exactly. Witnesses said it was an old guy with silver hair."

Mariette spent the rest of her week in L.A. like a tourist. She drove to the ocean, ate marine salad at Gladstone's, grabbed peanuts from a barrel near the door and tossed them to the sea gulls patrolling the sky around the restaurant. She took a side trip to Laguna Beach, stayed in a cliffside hotel, and had the sleep of her life to the steady sound of the surf. But her mind was never off the case.

She believed what the old man outside the apartment building said—he had no reason to lie. If Warren Stevens's son had been murdered, he had been living under an assumed name. The woman who killed him was seen fleeing in a car driven by a man with silver hair. Mariette could not help thinking of the Montreal news anchor. Of course, there had to be a lot of men with that sort of hair living in Los Angeles.

Still, it was an interesting coincidence. It might call for a further conversation with Mr. Stevens when she got back to Montreal.

"So you liked L.A.," Gordie Cleary said.

"As they say, good place to visit. Wouldn't want to live there." She had brought the lieutenant a Dodgers baseball cap, which he was wearing now, having bent the visor to the proper curve.

"You missed nothing. Our Wolfman is lying low."

"Am I still on the case?"

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"Sure. I want you to check out the more popular bars. Keep your eyes open. Listen to the chatter."

"I can do that," Mariette said.

She had one beer at the Maroon Club. She had another at the Carousel and another at the Tic Toc. Night after night it became a circuit that always ended up at the Rainbow because this was where she had first encountered Alfredo Stevens.

Mariette was reluctant to revisit her suspect's father. To confront a man of his stature and call him a liar was a tall order. He had admitted his son was gay. Perhaps inventing his demise in a faraway city was a twisted way of dealing with the situation.

She decided to let a telephone call suffice. Stevens came on the line after Mariette identified herself to the switchboard operator and then to the newsroom secretary. "I took a trip to L.A.," she said. "I drove around to the apartment building on Hampton. Turns out the murdered man was not Alfredo, your son. It was a man named Mackie and he was stabbed by a woman."

"There is an explanation. I'm not sure you would believe me."

"Were you there, Warren? The woman left the scene in a car driven by a silver-haired man."

"I've conferred with my lawyer. I've already said too much."

Her seat at the bar in the Rainbow was like a second home to Mariette Hubert. By the time she rolled in there she was experiencing a comfortable buzz. She really enjoyed drinking beer. It was the alcohol, of course. But it was also the smell of the hops and the sensation of pouring it down her throat and the way it filled her up. She preferred this to sipping the hard stuff. Yes, she was putting on a few pounds, but she could carry it.

The bar was crowded. Around midnight, a woman dressed in red leaned across Mariette's shoulder. Cornsilk hair framed a face with full lips and dark eyes. Her dusky complexion suggested mixed parentage. She said, "You are the most interesting woman in the place."

"Thank you." Mariette went back to her beer.

"Don't be offended. You can just say no. I was going to suggest a three-way."

"Forget it."

"There's a man outside in a black Lexus. He sent me in to find a partner. He will pay big money. Very big money."

"You said I could just say no. No."

"Everything is set up. He said he has a room on lower Drummond Street."

The detective's skin went cold. She slid off the stool, taking reassurance from the weight of the weapon in her purse. She said, "Maybe we can discuss this further with the gentleman outside."

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They left the bar together, the woman in red leading the way. The Lexus was parked near an alleyway. The woman opened the door to the backseat and ushered Mariette inside. At the same time, she dragged the purse out of the detective's hands and threw it down the alley into darkness. There was nobody else in the car. The woman got inside, showing Mariette the blade of an eight-inch hunting knife. The other hand dragged the cornsilk wig off a crew-cut head.

"It's me, dear. Alfredo, the big bad wolf. Let's go finish what we didn't do before."

"Now I get it. We've been looking for a man."

"It works. A touch of dark pancake and they think I'm Queen Latifah. I was cross-dressing long before I had to start killing women."

"Had to?"

"Shut up! You're as bad as the rest of them. So superior. So effing holier-than-thou. Do you have handcuffs?"

"In the purse you threw away."

"Never mind." Alfredo made a fist with the handle of the knife clutched inside it. He punched Mariette hard in the face—once, twice. She fell sideways across the seat, close to unconscious. He kept on punching.

She came to at the door of the Drummond Street room. Her right arm was across his shoulder. His left arm supported her around the waist. He was fumbling with a key in the lock. She must have moaned. "Oh, you're back," he said. "Good. I told the man downstairs my friend had too many martinis."

Alfredo opened the door, dragged her inside, and dropped her onto the bed. The room was dark. He closed the door, slid the bolt, and switched on the light.

"I must say, my boy, you look lovely." Warren Stevens was sitting in an armchair by the window. He was aiming a pistol at his son.

The detective was groggy, barely able to speak.

"Father, you promised to keep away."

"You forget this was my room, Alfredo. I rented it for harmless liaisons. When I turned it over to you, I expected you to do the same."

"You know nothing about me."

"Apparently not. Miss Hubert, are you all right?"

"I will be."

The old man said, "She told me what she found out in California. You and I were having a nice vacation. When you telephoned me in a panic and I drove to Hampton Avenue and saw the bloody mess, you promised it was an isolated event. A one-time thing, you said. Your partner had assaulted you and you fought back. I

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believed you."

The man in the dress, the heels, the disturbingly appropriate close-cropped hair repeated his disclaimer. "You know nothing about me."

"Detective, I need you to contact the police."

"We'll have none of that!" Alfredo sounded desperate.

"Leave the room, Mariette. There's a telephone downstairs."

She was outside the door when she heard the shots, two of them. She came back and saw Alfredo on the floor. His father was standing with the gun at his side. "He came at me," the old man said.

Mariette made up her mind in an instant. "Leave, Mr. Stevens. Just go. I'll say another woman was here. Another transvestite. They argued. She shot him and fled."

"You'll swear to that?"

"Absolutely."

When Stevens was gone, Mariette sagged onto the bed to keep from falling. She would collect herself for a few minutes, then call for assistance. So . . . the big bad wolf was dead. The slugs from his father's gun had entered the torso. His face was unmarked.

Mariette got off the bed and stumbled to the mirror over the dresser. Her face was so swollen from the beating she hardly recognized herself. She turned to the corpse on the floor. It wasn't fair; he was dead but he still looked beautiful. ●

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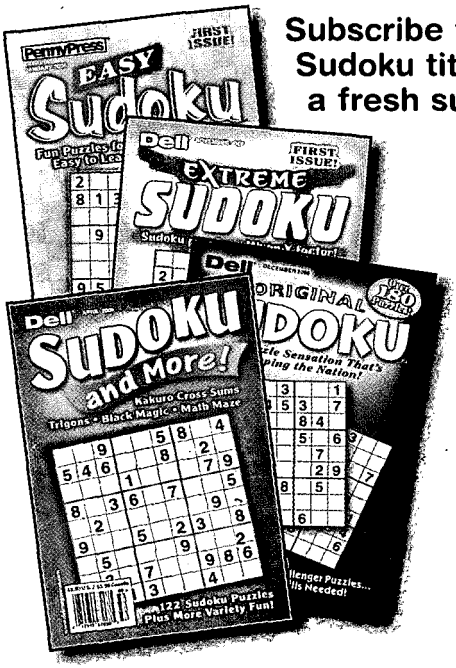

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